MARCIA.

W. C. NORRIS.

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MARCIA.

BY

W. E. NORRIS,

AUTHOR OF "THIRLBY HALL," ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

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JOHN MURRAY, ALBEMARLE STREET.

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MARCIA.

CHAPTER I.

THE DÉBUT OF MISS THOMPSON.

It was between five and six o'clock in the morning; the sun was up, and so were most of the four million inhabitants of London, the lives of most of the four millions being spent in hard labour. A numerically insignificant minority had just gone to bed, and were taking repose after the toils of the night, for they also labour hard after their fashion at certain seasons of the year. Two of them, however, were still sitting up talking, and were not a bit sleepy, nor even tired. For these two young women had, for the first time in their lives, been taking part in a very grand ball. Moreover, as the ball in question had been given by the parents of one of them and as the other was strikingly handsome, it is scarcely necessary to add that they had taken a very active part in it

indeed. Probably no girl, unless she have been so unhappy as to lack partners, feels tired after her first ball. One of these—the strikingly handsome one, who was tall and dark, and had that appearance of health and good spirits which is in itself beauty—said—

"I should like to begin this moment and do it all over again. Shouldn't you?"

"Well—not quite," answered her companion, a plump little brown-haired, brown-eyed maiden, who might just be called pretty, because she was so young and had such a pleasant, good-humoured face, but whose prettiness was not of the kind which outlasts many seasons. "You see, I had to dance with a good many people whom I didn't want to dance with, and who most likely didn't want to dance with me: that rather spoilt the first part of it. The last two hours were nice enough."

"It was all perfectly glorious from start to finish," Miss Marcia Thompson declared. "What nonsense the people talk who say that London ball-rooms are too crowded to dance in! Perhaps other ball-rooms aren't as large as yours, though?" she added, with an apprehensive glance at her friend.

"I believe there are plenty larger," answered Laura Beaumont. "The difficulty, it seems, isn't

so much want of space as want of men who can dance and will dance."

"Well, there were enough of them to-night," remarked Miss Marcia, with a retrospective smile of satisfaction.

"*You* found enough of them, no doubt, and I dare say you always will. By the way, you ought to be congratulated upon one conquest you have made in the person of Mr. Brett."

"Who? Oh, that old thing? I didn't know I had made a conquest of him, and I don't see what there is to congratulate me about in it if I have. He isn't much of a dancer."

"Isn't he? Well, at all events, he isn't an old thing. He is a rising young barrister—in fact, he is already a risen one; only he is to rise still higher, everybody says. He is going to be Solicitor-General, or Attorney-General, or something of that sort, when he has had a little more experience."

"I suppose that won't make him waltz any better, will it!"

"No, but it will add to his distinction, which is considered to be very great even now. He hardly ever goes to balls, and when he does he usually retires after standing for about ten minutes in the doorway. At least, so I am told; and now you

can understand why his friends thought he was paying you a marked compliment by dancing with you three times."

"Didn't it occur to his friends that I might be paying him rather a marked compliment by allowing him to spoil three dances for me? However, I admit that it was an involuntary compliment, and it shall not be repeated. The truth is that I hadn't the presence of mind to refuse when he asked me. This is what comes of being both shy and benevolent."

Miss Beaumont laughed; perhaps she did not think that either attribute was specially characteristic of her friend.

"Well," she said, "if Mr. Brett had asked me to dance only once, I should have felt much honoured. He may not be very young, or very beautiful, or even very amusing——"

"He isn't the least bit amusing," interjected Marcia.

"But he sets a high value upon himself, and that, of course, makes his attentions flattering. Some day, when he is Lord Chancellor, you will perhaps look back upon this evening with pride."

"Oh, bother him and his attentions!" returned Marcia. "By the time that he is Lord Chancellor I shall be dead, I trust. I don't see what there

can be to live for after one is forty—or even after one is thirty," she added, with a sigh.

Marcia Thompson agreed with certain profound philosophers that the whole aim, object, and meaning of life is the attainment of happiness, and, although she was aware that happiness may be attained by diverse methods, she did not make the mistake of imagining that she herself could ever be happy unless she was loved. Moreover, she was persuaded—whether rightly or wrongly—that nobody would care very much about her after her physical charms should have faded. It is, at any rate, certain that her physical charms had caused her to be beloved by many persons of both sexes who possibly might not otherwise have been attracted to her.

"Miss Thompson," her old schoolmistress had said to her in the course of a valedictory interview, "you cannot but be conscious that you have a beautiful face. Beauty, my dear, is a gift of God, like rank and wealth and intellect, and we, who possess none of these things, are not sincere if we pretend to underrate them. See, however, that you make a good use of what has been given to you, and remember that it must inevitably expose you to dangers and temptations. I am glad to think that you have the safeguard of a kind heart."

This was handsome on the part of the old lady, and was tolerably true into the bargain. That her well-meant platitudes should produce much effect upon a young girl who was about to be launched into society was hardly to be expected; but Marcia really did not intend to make any bad use of her advantages. She proposed, indeed, to use them, as she always had used them, for the subjugation of the hearts of others; but that did not prove her own to be an unkind one. Hitherto her conquests had been of a very innocent description, and it may be taken as redounding to her credit that she was adored by her school companions; yet one may doubt whether she would have achieved so large a measure of popularity without her beautiful face and her pretty little ways.

Chief among her school friends had always been Laura Beaumont, with whose hospitable parents she had spent more than one happy vacation. For Marcia was an orphan, with no near relations, and her guardians, who were business men residing in Liverpool, were only too glad to place her temporarily under the wing of so unexceptionable a chaperon as Mrs. Beaumont. Still more glad were they when, on the completion of Marcia's education, the same good-natured lady offered to

bring her out with her own daughter, to present her at Court, to take her into society, and—as the guardians fondly hoped—to find a suitable husband for her. Well, it ought not to be difficult, they thought, to find a suitable husband for a girl who was extremely good-looking and had a nice little fortune of her own. So Marcia was now installed in Grosvenor Place for the season, and the ordeal of her first Drawing-room was a thing of the past, and it only remained to her to amuse herself to the best of her ability, which in that direction was considerable. She did not think that it would amuse her at all to flirt with Mr. Brett; and when, some days after this, Laura informed her that the future Lord Chancellor was coming to dinner, she only made a face, saying that she hoped he would not take her in. However, he did take her in, and, in spite of herself, she was somewhat impressed and overawed by him.

A good many people of greater importance and experience than Miss Thompson were overawed by Eustace Brett at that period of his life. Judges, it was said, were a little frightened of him, for he was not only a clever and effective advocate, but a good lawyer, and he had an awkward way of being always in the right, whereas their lordships, like other mortals, were occasionally in the wrong.

In private, as in public life, he had contrived to make himself respected, admired, and to some extent feared; though how or why he had done so would be difficult to explain. He was a tall, spare, middle-aged man, with a smooth-shaven face, clear-cut features and thin lips, which rarely smiled; his conversation was not brilliant, he had no high connections, nor was there any reason, save his eminence in his profession (which could hardly be called a sufficient one) for his being admitted into the best houses in London. Yet he was so admitted, and he refused more invitations than he accepted, and he did not always trouble himself to be civil to his entertainers, which naturally made them take a good deal of pains to be civil to him. His manner with Marcia was not quite the same as it was with the rest of the world. She knew that, although she had had so few opportunities of observing his manner with the rest of the world, and the distinction flattered her vanity if it did not precisely touch her heart. His voice changed when he addressed her; he was evidently anxious to interest her; and he succeeded, though perhaps not quite after the fashion in which he had intended to succeed. For the rest, he did not hesitate to put direct questions to her about her tastes and ambitions, nor

was he at all lenient in his criticisms on her replies.

"Oh, but you can't live simply for amusement," he said, in answer to one of her remarks; "nobody can do that. Some men—that is, if they have large properties or keep racing stables or something of that kind—may make their amusements a sort of substitute for work; but I don't see how women can. You would never be able to persuade yourself that it was your sole mission in life to attend balls and dinners and evening parties."

"What should you think was my mission in life, Mr. Brett?" inquired Marcia, turning her large dark eyes upon her neighbour.

"The same as that of other women, I imagine. If you marry—as you certainly will—it will be your mission to be a good wife and mother, which implies a good many hours of daily work."

"I suppose so," returned Marcia, with a grimace. "The moral of that seems to be that I had better amuse myself while I can."

The man was doubtless a prig, possibly also a little impertinent; yet he impressed her. His style of making love (for that he meant to make love was obvious) was at all events original and very unlike that adopted by her other admirers. Of other admirers Miss Marcia very soon had

quite as many as she could manage. Some of them were apparently serious, others were doubtful; but all were welcome; and she was the more kind and encouraging with them when she discovered that Mr. Brett strongly disapproved of the levity of her conduct. After the evening of the dinner party in Grosvenor Place she was continually meeting Mr. Brett, who went into society that season more than he had ever done before, and she knew that he did this for the sake of meeting her; and he had a way of glancing at her severely and drawing in his lips, when she passed him on the arm of some gay youth or other, which afforded her much gratification.

"You make that poor man waste a great deal of valuable time," Laura (who was not herself overburdened with admirers, and consequently had leisure to observe the proceedings of others) told her. To which she replied that she was innocent of any wish to draw Mr. Brett away from his professional labours. Nevertheless, it pleased her to think that he was wasting his time for her sake, and she was glad to know that he was jealous of her, nor did she object to the little lectures which he saw fit to administer to her from time to time.

"Does the conversation of these young swells interest you, Miss Thompson?" he asked her one

evening, "or do you only look as if it interested you by way of increasing your popularity?"

"All sorts of people interest me," she answered. "I don't think I care particularly what they say, so long as they do their best to be pleasant. You never try to be pleasant, do you?"

"Oh, yes, I try to be pleasant to the people whom I don't care about; with the others I try to be honest."

"That is very flattering to me; because, from the general style of your observations, I suppose there can be no doubt that you class me amongst 'the others.' Honestly speaking, you consider me a very frivolous sort of young woman, don't you?"

"Not yet," he answered, in his quiet, deliberate way. "But I should say that there was some danger of your becoming so. It seems to me that you care a little too much for admiration and not quite enough whose admiration it may be. That is the nature of most women; but I hope it is not your nature—and I don't think it is."

"What is my nature, Mr. Brett?" Marcia inquired; and, as she spoke, she turned her face towards his with an expression of candid curiosity.

"Well," he said, "you have strong affections."

Marcia nodded. "Quite right, so far. Go on, please."

"You are not exactly vain; but you are extremely anxious to be liked or thought well of by everybody, and that often leads you into saying things which you don't really mean. I shouldn't wonder if it sometimes led you into doing things of which you don't really approve. You are rather deficient in moral courage, and you have not much self-confidence. Your instincts are certainly good; still it is doubtful whether you will follow them, because you will always be under the influence of those with whom you may happen to associate."

"You are like those tiresome people who grab one's hand after dinner and pretend to decipher one's character from studying the lines on one's palm," remarked Marcia.

"Have I deciphered it successfully?"

"Oh, yes, I dare say you have. Let me see; I am vain, insincere, rather cowardly, and miserably weak. Yes; I should think that was all right. Any more compliments?"

"I didn't know that you wished for compliments," said Mr. Brett, with a grave smile.

"Yet you appear to have discovered that there is nothing in the world that I value more."

"I can pay you compliments without turning aside from the path of strict honesty. I can tell you—only I am sure you are aware of it—that you

have a fascination for which there is no name that I know of, but which will suffice to bring any man or any number of men to your feet just as often as you choose to exercise it. I can tell you that you are already very powerful, and that you may travel a long way before you reach the limits of your powers. Then, of course, I can tell you, if you care to hear it, that you have eclipsed all the ladies who are called beauties to-night."

Marcia coloured with pleasure. Of such speeches as that she felt that she could never have too many. But perhaps Mr. Brett thought that he had now been complimentary enough; for he added—

"The risk is that you may be spoilt by all this adulation. You may think flirtation so delightful and so amusing that it isn't worth your while to aim at anything else than reducing that art to perfection. If you do that, you will drive away the only people whose—er—friendship is worth having."

"Meaning your own—er—friendship?" inquired Marcia, with a very fair mimicry of his intonation.

"I won't say that," Mr. Brett replied; "I don't give or withdraw my friendship lightly. But I confess that I shall be grievously disappointed if you turn out a hard-hearted flirt, like most of the

girls whom one meets. I hope better things of you."

Marcia laughed and cut short the colloquy by signalling to one of her partners, who had been hovering in the offing for the last minute or so. There are certain accusations which have never given offence to any woman since the world began. It is wrong to be a hard-hearted flirt; but it is not disagreeable to be stigmatized in that way by persons who are incapable of forming a just judgment and whose incapacity is due to circumstances for which allowance may easily be made. At least, Mr. Brett could not say that she had flirted with him.

Nevertheless, other people said so; for this is a censorious world, and nobody will ever know how good we really all are and how little we intend to work mischief until we learn to judge of our neighbours by ourselves—which is a very hard lesson to learn. Laura Beaumont, for instance, told her friend in so many words that she was behaving abominably.

"It isn't fair, Marcia," said she. "I don't complain of your amusing yourself with these young men, who very likely are only amusing themselves with you; but you know quite well that Mr. Brett is in earnest, and, unless you are in

earnest too, you have no business to go on like this."

"Like what?" inquired Marcia, with an air of innocent amazement.

"You ought not to make him think that you are purposely teasing him, and that you care for him in reality a great deal more than you care for anybody else."

"I do hope that he is not so disgustingly conceited as to think any such thing!" Marcia declared.

"I don't know about the conceit; I know that is what I should think if I were in his place. It stands to reason that you wouldn't sit out two or three dances in succession with him, if you didn't either care for him or wish to make him believe that you did."

Marcia put her head on one side and considered this point for a short space of time before she answered—

"Well, I like him, you know. He is different from other men; he scolds me instead of flattering me, and when he is in a good humour he is really rather nice. I don't see why I am bound to refuse his friendship."

"But perhaps he hasn't offered you that?" suggested Laura.

"He has, though. At least, he kindly gave me to understand that I possessed it, and that I might possibly lose it if I didn't amend my ways."

"Oh, he has got as far as that, has he? Well, one knows the true name of such friendship. Perhaps, after all, you won't lose it."

"I am sure I shall not deserve to lose it," Marcia replied demurely.

It is scarcely necessary to say that the above conversation had little influence, one way or the other, upon a young woman whose actions were guided rather by her heart than by her head, and who was disposed to regard the affection of her fellow-creatures as her prerogative. Marcia was a good deal more impressed by some remarks which fell from her hostess a few days later. Good-natured Mrs. Beaumont, who had already married several daughters successfully, and expected to marry the youngest of them without much difficulty in the course of that season or the next, was, for the time being, greatly interested in the orphan who had been committed to her charge. What with her face and her fortune, Marcia ought, she thought, to make a good match, and, although Mr. Brett might fairly be counted eligible, he had certain blemishes to which it seemed only right to call the attention of the inexperienced.

She therefore felt it to be her duty to say to Marcia—

"My dear, I have noticed that you see a great deal of that Mr. Brett, and he is always calling here now, instead of leaving a card at the door, like other people. I have nothing in the world to say against him; only—he isn't very young, and I should think he might be a little bit exacting. I see that you don't like my speaking so plainly; but the fact is that a word in season often prevents subsequent unpleasantness, and perhaps you will forgive me when you remember that just at present I am standing in the place of your mother."

"What do you wish me to say, Mrs. Beaumont?" asked Marcia, after a moment of hesitation.

Mrs. Beaumont laughed. "Not very much," she answered. "I only wished to consult you as to whether I had not better tell them to say 'not at home,' the next time that Mr. Brett calls."

"Of course you can do just what you choose in your own house, Mrs. Beaumont," said Marcia.

"Quite so, my dear; but this time it is a question of what *you* may choose. I don't think that, if I were you, I should choose Mr. Brett. I believe he is pretty well off, and he is certainly clever, and his character is all that it ought to be; still he is too old for you and rather too solemn, according

to my notions. Fortunately, he is man of the world enough to take a hint, and probably a very delicate one will suffice to prevent him from troubling you any more."

Mrs. Beaumont would not have said that if she had understood her *protégée* better. Marcia was quite certain that she was not in love with Mr. Brett; but she was equally certain that it would be painful to her to dismiss him, and she never, if she could possibly help it, gave herself pain. So she said—

"I wouldn't for the world drive any one away from such a pleasant house as this, Mrs. Beaumont. There really is nothing between me and Mr. Brett —nothing at all! I hope you won't snub him on my account."

Mrs. Beaumont laughed again and replied, "Very well, my dear." No girl could be expected to proclaim her sentiments more distinctly, and if Miss Thompson liked middle-aged lawyers, that, after all, was Miss Thompson's affair. No objection was likely to be raised against this particular lawyer by Miss Thompson's guardians.

Thus it came to pass that, without any special exertion on his own part, Mr. Brett attained to the position of a recognized suitor.

CHAPTER II.

TWO ENGAGEMENTS.

Success in life is perhaps more often achieved by those who start without advantages than by those who, being favourably handicapped, have leisure to ask themselves whether the game is worth the candle. At all events, the men who know that they have only their own talents and industry to rely upon are likely, if they have any ambition, to exert these to the utmost; and it was doubtless, because he had done so, that Eustace Brett had risen, at a comparatively early age, to the front rank in his profession. The son of a provincial banker, he had declined to join his elder brother George in carrying on the paternal avocations, and had been thought foolish for throwing away such a chance. Possibly he had been foolish, for his brother had become a London banker and a rich man; yet he had attained to such eminence in the calling of his choice that his brother, like the rest of the world, respected him, and at the time with

which we are now concerned, he was making a large annual income. He was, in truth, rather industrious than talented, although experience had enabled him to acquire a knowledge of human nature which stood him in good stead. He believed himself to be an excellent judge of character, as indeed he was, within certain limits. No man can be a judge of what he has not seen, and there are many phases of human nature of which this distinguished lawyer was necessarily ignorant. However, he did not know that, and he would have had to be a much larger-minded man than he was to have even surmised it. He was in all things thoroughly honest and conscientious; he had, while still young, faced the religious difficulties which honest and conscientious men pretty generally have to face, and had obtained answers which had seemed to him satisfactory from teachers of the Evangelical school; he was now (after passing through this mild form of a common disease) quite at rest in his mind with regard to the problems of a present and future life; he went twice to church on Sundays and gave away a fair proportion of his professional gains in charity. Evidently, the proper course marked out for him was to persevere in well-doing until he obtained the legal prize which was his due—to marry some

worthy and submissive woman, to die in an honoured old age, and eventually to be deposited in Kensal Green beneath a sufficiently imposing weight of marble.

But Fate, which laughs at the oldest and gravest of us, had decreed that Mr. Eustace Brett should make himself ridiculous by falling over head and ears in love with a school-girl; and, as he had never been in love before (possibly he had never had the time), his love was as serious and earnest as everything else about him. He did not think himself ridiculous for loving Marcia Thompson, although he had at the outset great doubts as to whether she would be a suitable wife for him. These doubts were overcome when he had seen more of her, because her conversation convinced him that she had a yielding and affectionate nature; but, even if he had not reached that happy conviction, it would have made no difference, for he loved her, and it would have been as impossible to him as to any other mortal to resign his hopes of winning her from considerations of prudence. Now his hopes of winning her were tolerably strong. It may be that, having hitherto obtained everything upon which he had set his heart, he was a trifle more self-reliant than a modest man should have been; yet he was not wrong when he said to himself that

she displayed an encouraging willingness to defer to his wishes. She was very young; she liked dancing and flattery and admiration, but she was discriminating enough to distinguish between true gold and mere gilding; added to which, she could, if she had chosen to do so, very easily have dismissed a suitor who wearied her. Such was Mr. Brett's analysis of Marcia's character, and, although it was not quite accurate, it did not lack plausibility.

During this period of his life, Eustace Brett managed to get on with an extraordinarily small allowance of sleep. Work had to be done; but then also balls had to be attended, and naturally there was nothing for it but to take pleasure first and work afterwards—which is not to be recommended as a system. He consoled himself with the reflection that it was only temporary. A married man who has professional duties to discharge cannot be expected to go to balls, and a married woman should have other ambitions than that of shining in society. He did his love-making in a quiet, steady, methodical way. He was aware that his age was a little against him, and that he had not a face which could be counted upon to captivate a young girl's fancy; but he aspired to reach Marcia's heart through her reason, which was, no doubt, some-

what absurd, and yet was perhaps his best chance.

In obedience to the instructions which she had received, or imagined that she had received, Mrs. Beaumont gave orders that he was to be admitted whenever he called; and very soon it came to be an understood thing that he might be expected every Sunday afternoon. Possibly that was why Mrs. and Miss Beaumont, being both of them kind-hearted people, happened to go out one Sunday afternoon, and were thoughtful enough to tell the butler that, if Mr. Brett should call, he was to be shown into the drawing-room, where Miss Thompson might entertain him until their return. However that may be, Mr. Brett did call at his accustomed hour, and was at once ushered into the presence of Marcia, who held out her hand to him, without rising from the arm-chair in which she was reclining, and said—

"I was wondering whether you would put in an appearance to-day. I am so glad you have, because they have left me all alone, and I don't know what to do with myself."

Mr. Brett was somewhat given to the use of long and ceremonious phrases. He replied, "I am doubly fortunate in finding you alone, and of being the humble means of providing you with

some relief from the monotony of your own company. At the same time," he added gallantly, "it is difficult for me to understand how your company could possibly be monotonous."

"You wouldn't," observed Marcia, "have the slightest difficulty in understanding it if you lived with me."

"I should be glad," answered Mr. Brett, "to be allowed an opportunity of deciding that point by the test of experience; meanwhile, I venture respectfully to dispute it."

Marcia thought that in any case it would not take her very long to grow weary of so long-winded a companion, and it will be admitted that she had some reason for her belief. He was always wearisome and heavy when the conversation took that turn, and perhaps he was not without a glimmering of the truth, for he hastened to change it.

"You look tired, Miss Thompson," he remarked. "Are you beginning to find out that a London season is not only a very fatiguing, but a very monotonous thing?"

"I don't think I am," answered Marcia musingly; "but it isn't quite such fun as I thought it would be. If other people enjoyed it, it would be pleasant enough; the unfortunate thing is that most of them seem to be too stupid to enjoy it."

"On behalf of the stupid majority," said Mr. Brett, "I beg to assure you that we are less stupid than you think us. We enjoy society under certain conditions; that is, when it enables us to meet certain individuals."

"Oh, I wasn't thinking of *you!*" returned Marcia, not over-civilly.

"No; but I was thinking of you. I am hardly what can be called a society man, but I have liked going into society this year for a reason which you can easily guess." And, as Marcia laughed without replying, he resumed presently: "I don't say that I should like it for two years in succession, because my spare time is so limited. I am glad to think that you also have found one season of perpetual racket enough to satisfy you."

"But indeed I haven't," Marcia declared. "I should like to have any number of seasons of perpetual racket. I am not like you, you see—my spare time is unlimited."

"Well, at present perhaps it is; but it will not always be so. Miss Thompson, I know you will not be surprised when I tell you that I love you, and that my dearest wish is to call you my wife. You must have seen that for a long time past; and what gives me some hope is that you have never discouraged me. I am not a very young

man; but perhaps it is better to be loved by a man who has passed the age of change: and this, I think, I may say for myself, that if you will intrust your future happiness to me you will not regret it."

Marcia was considerably taken aback. She had not expected Mr. Brett to make his offer so soon, nor, indeed, had he contemplated doing so when he entered the house. He now sat, with dispassionate calm, awaiting her reply, which, when it came, was a somewhat ambiguous one.

"But, Mr. Brett," she said, "have you considered what you are doing? I—I don't think I am at all a domestic sort of person."

He answered, smiling, "My dear Miss Thompson, you can't very well know yet what your tastes are. I may be permitted to doubt whether the kind of life that you have been leading lately would not very soon pall upon you. But pray don't think that I should ever wish to exclude you from the society of your friends. I should be very well content to leave the question of excessive gaiety to be decided by circumstances and by your own good sense."

"And if I were to decide in favour of the excessive gaiety?"

"I don't think you would; but I am willing to

take the risk. I am willing, in fact, to take any and every risk. Now can you accept me?"

She really did not think that she could. She did not love him, yet she was curiously reluctant to dismiss him, and she knew instinctively that he was not the kind of man to give her a chance of reconsidering her refusal. What she would have preferred would have been to keep him hanging on for a little longer; so at length she said, "I can't feel sure that we care enough for one another, Mr. Brett."

"You may feel sure, so far as I am concerned," he answered quickly. "I know I have not been an impassioned lover; it is not my way to be impassioned. But the simple truth is, that I have never loved any one but you, and never shall love any one else. As for your feelings, I don't ask or expect that they should be very warm towards me just now; I only hope that they may become so; and I believe that they will, if absolute devotion on my part can make them so."

Marcia gazed out through the open window across the blaze of flowers in the balcony, and hesitated. What was there about this grave, pedantic man that attracted her? Why had she in the course of the last week refused two offers of marriage from men who were younger, probably

richer and certainly more attractive in the general acceptation of the term? She could not answer these questions, although the answer was not such a very difficult one to discover. She was drawn towards Eustace Brett, in the first place, because she did not quite understand him; in the second, because she was a little afraid of him; and in the third, because she was not a little proud of having captured him.

"You know what I am," she began, after a long pause.

"I believe I do pretty well," he answered smilingly.

"Well, if you will take me for what I am—but Mrs. Beaumont says you are very exacting."

"I do not think that you will find me that."

"Then, if you are sure you will never expect me to be what I am not——"

The next moment Eustace Brett's thin lips were pressed upon Marcia's forehead, and the moment after that she regretted her precipitancy. She had done a foolish thing, and she was frightened and would have liked to draw back, only she had not the requisite courage. Yet it is not improbable that she would have made her condition of mind apparent to him, and that he would have granted her her release—for, in spite of his solemnity and

priggishness, he was neither an ungenerous man nor a fool—if at this moment Mrs. and Miss Beaumont had not appeared upon the scene. Their entrance, of course, put an end to the interview, and, after a few minutes, Mr. Brett got up and took his leave.

Scarcely had he quitted the room when Mrs. Beaumont, who was looking happy and excited, announced that she was the bearer of a piece of news, which she was sure that dear Marcia would be glad to hear. This was nothing less than that Lord Wetherby had proposed to Laura that afternoon and had been accepted.

"A complete surprise to me," Mrs. Beaumont declared, "though I dare say it may not be so to you."

But it was a very great surprise to Marcia, and somehow or other it was not quite as pleasant a one as it should have been. This Lord Wetherby, who was one of the frequenters of the house in Grosvenor Place, but who had never, so far as Marcia's observations had gone, been specially attentive to Laura, was in all respects an excellent match. He was young, he was rich, he was by no means bad-looking, and his temper was as good as his manners. Now, Laura was doubtless thoroughly worthy of any matrimonial prize; still

it was a little bit astonishing to hear that she had secured one, and Marcia could not repress a sharp pang of jealousy, together with a sense of personal humiliation. As for making known her own engagement, she felt that, for the moment, it would be impossible to do that. What was her distinguished, but mature and plebeian, lawyer in comparison with this unexceptionable young nobleman? To proclaim her destiny, after hearing what Laura's was to be, would be a descent to positive bathos.

All these thoughts passed rapidly through her mind, but were not legible upon her face, because she had promptly cast herself into the arms of her friend; and by the time that the embracings were over she had recovered her outward serenity sufficiently to resume her seat smilingly, and beg to be told all about it. But, although her request was complied with, it may be doubted whether she heard very much of the triumphant pæan which good Mrs. Beaumont proceeded to sing. Not until late that night could she make up her mind to confide to Laura that she also was about to become a bride, and the warmth with which she was congratulated seemed to her to be a trifle excessive.

"I am so very glad!" Laura exclaimed. "I

was sure you cared for him, though you wouldn't admit it."

"Were you?" returned Marcia. "Then you knew more than I did. More than I know even now perhaps," she added, with a smile and a sigh.

"But then, my dear Marcia, why in the world——"

"Ah, exactly! that's just what I can't tell you. Well, he seems inclined to let me have my own way, which is some comfort. He said he was prepared to take any risk."

"I hope you won't accept that too literally," said Laura gravely.

"Oh, I warned him that I was not a domestic person. I dare say I shall go to more balls than he will care about; but then of course it will always be open to him to stay at home."

Laura shook her head, for this did not sound to her like a very hopeful beginning; but her mother, to whom she subsequently reported Marcia's remarks, laughed, and did not seem to think much of them.

"Marcia is a good girl, and will settle down into a good wife," the experienced matron said. "I am rather sorry that she is going to marry a man so much older than herself; but, after all, it is her own choice, and he will certainly be kind

to her. I should think he was just—and even generous, in his way."

In the way of money, at all events, Mr. Brett proved himself to be generous; for he insisted that Marcia's fortune should be settled upon herself; and this gave her guardians a good opinion of him. The guardians, indeed, thought that the girl had done quite as well for herself as could be expected. They were not sorry to be relieved of their responsibilities; they considered that she had shown a discretion beyond her years in selecting a husband of established reputation and unblemished character, and they gladly fell in with Mrs. Beaumont's suggestion that the wedding ceremony should be solemnized at the same time and place as that of her daughter and Lord Wetherby. Marcia herself, after the first moment of repentance which has been mentioned, was disposed to acquiesce in her lot. She really liked her betrothed, who was not always as tedious as he has appeared in the last few pages; he gave her some beautiful presents, he deferred to all her wishes, and seemed sincerely anxious to make her happy. Evidently his love was of a practical rather than of a demonstrative kind; but perhaps, under all the circumstances, that was hardly a matter for regret.

So Marcia's first London season, which was also to be her last as a spinster, passed away, and on the eve of the day appointed for the double wedding the two girls renewed the vow of eternal friendship which they had exchanged at school, promising that in the future, as in the past, they would tell one another everything.

"Not that you will have much to tell," Marcia remarked. "You adore Lord Wetherby, who adores you, and you will just go on like that until one of you dies. You will be perfectly happy, and do you think you will ever be a little dull? No; I suppose not."

"I hope not," answered Laura, "and I hope you will be as happy as we shall."

"Oh, there's no telling. I may have a dull life or I may have a merry one; the doubt is what consoles me. Nowadays, when people start for India or Australia, they simply take their passages as if they were getting into a railway carriage. It is safe and comfortable; but it isn't interesting. In old times, before they undertook such a voyage, they made their wills and took leave of their friends, and there was no certainty at all that they would ever reach their destination. All sorts of exciting adventures might happen to them. They might be wrecked or captured by

pirates, or fifty things. Now, that is the sort of voyage that I am about to set out upon."

"I think I prefer the safety and comfort to the excitement," said Laura.

"Well, I don't think I do. That is the difference between you and me, my dear."

CHAPTER III.

TEN YEARS LATER.

It is always the unexpected, we are told, which comes to pass; but perhaps, if this be the case, it is less by reason of the numerous accidents of life than because so few of us have insight or foresight enough to discern probabilities. It was not, for instance, really probable that Marcia's career as the wife of Eustace Brett would be marked by any startling or exciting incidents, although she herself half hoped, half feared, that it would be, and although an unconcerned by-stander might very well have thought the conditions favourable for the development of a domestic drama. Here was a husband no longer young, sedate beyond his years and immersed in work during the greater part of the day and night; here was a wife utterly without experience, eager for admiration and possessed of a face and form which were pretty certain to provoke it; better

materials for the construction of the time-honoured tragi-comedy could not be desired. But, as a matter of fact, nothing of the sort was enacted. What happened was what more often than not does happen when such a man marries such a woman. They were not happy together, nor were they particularly unhappy; he yielded a little and she yielded a little; they did not quarrel, but they soon became hopelessly estranged, because they had not a single interest in common, and because the deep affection which he had for her was not evidenced in the only way that she could have understood. Of the two he was doubtless the more unhappy; for he loved his wife, and by the end of a year he had reached the conviction that she did not love him and never would. At the same time, it is only fair to her to say that he had grievously disappointed her, and that he was in a great measure to blame for that. She had imagined him a masterful man, and if he had shown himself masterful and had also been a little less sparing of small endearments, he might possibly have made a conquest of her. But he did not do so. He allowed her to have her own way, while often expressing disapproval of it; he neither issued commands nor asked favours; and so they gradually drifted apart until a gulf opened

between them which was all the more impassable because neither of them quite realized its width.

Marcia sought consolation in society; and it must be admitted that she sought it pretty successfully. She became very popular; she entertained a good deal, at first on a small scale, afterwards, as her acquaintance increased, more extensively; her beauty developed as she grew older, and she soon acquired the tone and habits of a fashionable woman. Her admirers were many in number; but they were such admirers as husbands do not commonly object to, and if Mr. Brett objected to any of them, he refrained from saying so. To some of her lady friends he did object, but that was in early days. When she had gained a little experience, she found that there were certain houses in which it was as well that she should not be thought to be upon a footing of intimacy, and she wisely avoided those houses. The beautiful Mrs. Brett was commended for her discretion, and indeed it was very necessary that she should be discreet, for her husband rarely accompanied her into the gay world, the press of his avocations rendering it impossible for him to do so.

He, like Marcia, had to seek for consolation somewhere, and he found it in unremitting labour.

Thus he filled up his time and had no leisure for despondency, and made large sums of money, which were spent as soon as made; for he had a big house in Portland Place, and his wife's parties were expensive. In one sense he may have been wise; in another he was fatally foolish; for a system of all work and no play often has results more disastrous than that of mere dulness. The result in poor Mr. Brett's case was a total nervous break-down, accompanied by an illness which for some weeks threatened to end his life. He pulled through; but he rose from his bed a changed and aged man. The doctors enjoined a long period of absolute rest; so that for six months the house in Portland Place was closed, while its owners wandered through Southern France and Italy. It was a sad journey for them both. They were thrown together more than they had ever been since their marriage, and their lack of mutual sympathy necessarily became accentuated. Eustace Brett, who had never learnt how to amuse himself and was too old to learn by that time, was bored to death. He gradually recovered his health to some extent, but he was often suffering, sometimes peevish, and always longing for the unwholesome atmosphere of the law courts. As for Marcia, she would have been miserable enough,

but for the companionship of her only child, a bright-faced boy, whom she adored. She could not be unhappy while she had Willie with her; and who knows from what perils and temptations and evil thoughts and foolish actions that little black-eyed mortal may not have saved her? Never, surely, since the world began was there such a dear, good boy! That, at all events, was his mother's opinion, and indeed she might be pardoned for holding it. He was a sturdy little man, and sometimes he got into mischief, like other children; but he was as brave as a lion, and he told no lies, and he loved his beautiful mother with all his heart. On the other hand, he had no great affection for his father, who alarmed him and did not know what to say to him.

Eustace Brett returned joyfully to London and work; but his joy was of brief duration. A very short time sufficed to make it manifest to him that the ambitious dreams which had been nearer to his heart than he had supposed must be laid aside at once and for ever. A competent authority told him as much in plain words.

"Of course, Mr. Brett," said his doctor, "you can kill yourself if you choose; you will easily accomplish that in about a year, I should think. But you cannot go on as you are doing now and

live. I am far from saying that you are not to use your brain in moderation; only you have overtaxed it, and it will not serve you in the future as it has served you in the past."

The unfortunate man bowed to a decision which his own sensations confirmed, and went away with a heavy heart. What was to become of him? He had secret hopes of a judgeship; but for various reasons these hopes were not realized, and one morning he announced to his wife, in his usual deliberate, unimpassioned voice, that he had been offered the appointment of a London Police-magistrate, and had accepted the offer. From every point of view, it was a melancholy descent. Marcia had long ceased to take a lively interest in her husband's fame and fortunes, although she had always imagined that he would eventually become one of the Law-officers of the Crown; but what appealed to her feelings far more than the abandonment of this prospect was the necessity which was now explained to her that they should greatly reduce their style of living. Between them, she and her husband would henceforth be able to make up something over £3000 a year, which certainly cannot be called poverty; still everything is relative, and they had been accustomed to expend every penny of a much larger

income. When Marcia removed herself and her knickknacks from Portland Place to Cornwall Terrace, Regent's Park, her sensations were akin to those which a patriotic emigrant may be supposed to experience on bidding his native land good night. She could not believe that anybody "in society" could dwell in the Regent's Park, and that small section of the society of London into which she had found her way seemed to her to be the only society worth living in. Of course she was mistaken, because there are plenty of charming people quite outside the fashionable world; yet her mistake was not unnatural, for when all has been said against it that can be said (and that is a good deal), the smart society of London remains, upon the whole, the pleasantest, the best-bred, and the easiest society in the modern civilized world. Marcia, who, like many of its members, did not belong to it by right of birth, had assimilated its habits, and the thought of severing herself from it caused her to shed some bitter tears.

Yet the new manner of life did not prove to be so unlike the old one as she had feared that it would be. She was too popular to be allowed to drop out of sight, and her change of address caused no sensible diminution in the number of daily invita-

tions which she received. It was her husband who was forgotten, and whose existence was not always recognized upon the invitation cards. For that matter, he seemed very willing to be forgotten, and even when he was asked to dinner, he generally requested his wife to send an excuse on his behalf.

One evening, some ten years after her marriage, Marcia was going out to dine without Mr. Brett, who had, as usual, declined to accompany her. She was bound for the house of her old friend Lady Wetherby, and she looked forward to a pleasant evening, because Lady Wetherby gave nice little dinners, and always took some pains in assorting her guests. In Lady Wetherby's case the unexpected had not occurred. She was a happy, prosperous woman; she and her husband were the best of friends; she had two children, a boy and a girl; she discharged her social duties with ease and success, and she was interested in many charitable undertakings. Whether she and Marcia had adhered strictly to their engagement that they would tell one another everything may be doubted —after a certain age, one perceives the difficulty of carrying out such pledges,—but their friendship had stood the test of time, and when Mrs. Brett was attacked (for indeed Mrs. Brett was far too handsome to escape attack), it was not in the

presence of Lady Wetherby that any one ventured to make insinuations against her. It was a somewhat stout and matronly personage who embraced Marcia on her arrival in St. George's Place, and made some perfunctory inquiries about the health of the absent Police-magistrate: Lady Wetherby, like other people, had learnt to regard Mr. Brett as more or less of a cypher. About a dozen guests were assembled in her pretty, dimly-lighted drawing-room, and with most of these Marcia was already acquainted. She did not, however, remember to have met before a young man whom her hostess presently led up to her and introduced as Mr. Archdale.

"Mr. Archdale tells me that he hasn't the pleasure of knowing you," Lady Wetherby said; "but you must know him very well by name."

"*The* Mr. Archdale?" inquired Marcia, with a smile, after bowing to the stranger.

"Oh, I suppose so," he replied, shrugging his shoulders and laughing. "At least, I am the man who paints the careful little pictures—which is probably what you mean."

"I am not an art critic," said Marcia; "but I like your pictures better than anybody else's, and if they are carefully painted, isn't that an additional merit?"

"Oh, they are carefully painted," answered the young man. "I take a lot of time and trouble about them; but people who are said to be judges tell me that they aren't first-rate, and I can well believe it. However, they have brought me fame and money; so that I ought to be contented. In point of fact I *am* contented."

He certainly looked so. His perfectly chiselled features, his sleepy blue eyes, with their long dark lashes, the pose of his small head, the smile that perpetually hovered about his lips and the slight drawl with which he spoke—all expressed a lazy satisfaction with the world into which he had been born, and which in truth had so far brought him a great deal more happiness than discomfort. He wore a short peaked beard and a moustache which was twisted upwards; his crisp, curly brown hair was cut close, and his clothes fitted him very nicely. Evidently he was a bit of a dandy as well as a celebrated artist. Marcia at once took a fancy to him—she was not peculiar in that respect—and was glad when he told her that he had recived instructions to conduct her to the dining-room.

"And now," said she, by way of opening the conversation, after they had taken their places at the table, "I want you to improve my mind a

little with regard to art. It isn't every day that I get the chance of sitting beside a genius."

"If you will promise not to betray me, Mrs. Brett," he replied, "I will confess to you that you haven't that privilege to-night. I can draw pretty well, and I know something about colour: more can't be said for me. It is true that the public and the newspapers say a good deal more, but that is only because they know no better."

"Is that the modesty of true greatness or only an unworthy attempt to extract compliments?" asked Marcia.

"It's neither, it's the unvarnished truth. I'm afraid I can't say anything that is likely to improve your mind, because my own is of the earth, earthy. I love everything beautiful"—here he suddenly raised his eyes for a moment to his neighbour's face—"and I suppose that is why I am a painter, but when my brother-artists begin to talk transcendentalism, I'm out of it. I simply don't know what they mean—I don't feel that I have any high mission; I don't want to elevate the human race; the human race in its present imperfect condition is good enough for the likes of me. As far as I know myself, I want nothing except to have a good time while I can. Let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die."

Marcia assumed that he did not quite mean what he said; yet his sentiments did not fail to find an echo in her own heart, and indeed he was so handsome that he might have said far worse things without shocking her. She, too, loved beauty: she, too, had a very great desire to enjoy herself; and although she went to church regularly and accepted the doctrines of Christianity in a theoretical sort of way, she was far from thinking the world as bad a place as some Christians would have us believe it. She and her companion had a long talk about art, in the course of which they contrived to say many things altogether irrelevant to their subject, and to become very well acquainted with one another. When the ladies left the room, and Lady Wetherby asked her how she had got on with her partner, she answered—

"I think he is quite charming. He isn't a bit conceited or shoppy, and he seems to like all the things that I like."

"I wouldn't answer for his not being conceited," returned Lady Wetherby, laughing; "but he doesn't appear to be shoppy, and I can quite understand that your tastes agree. He is coming to stay with us in the country later on. Wetherby has given him an order to paint some panels for us, and I dare say he will take a long time about

it; for he is a very idle youth, notwithstanding his cleverness."

"Is he well off?" Marcia asked.

"Well, yes, I believe he has a little money; and, of course, now that he is the fashion, he gets long prices for his pictures. For his own sake it is unfortunate that he isn't obliged to work harder."

"But for the sake of other people it is fortunate that he sometimes has time to dine with his friends," observed Marcia. And she thought she would like to ask this interesting young artist, who so little resembled other artists, to dine in Cornwall Terrace.

However, she could not do that without leave; for her husband, who was becoming more and more of a recluse, detested strange faces. Besides, Mr. Archdale disappointed her a little by making no effort to join her when he appeared with the other men. She noticed that while ostensibly conversing with the two ladies behind whose chairs he had seated himself, he was surreptitiously sketching something or somebody upon his shirt-sleeve, and when at length the groups broke up and he slowly approached her, she said—

"If it isn't an impertinent request, might I look at your cuff, Mr. Archdale?"

"Oh, certainly," he answered, laughing; "but

I have made a mess of it. I dare say you won't guess whose profile this is meant to represent."

She had not, however, any difficulty in recognizing the subject of the outline submitted to her, and in truth the portrait was not an unflattering one. "I should be very ungrateful if I complained of that," she remarked smilingly. "Is it a habit of yours to amuse yourself in this way when you dine out?"

He shook his head.

"Too dangerous," he answered. "Still, once in a while, I venture to run the risk, because there are chances which one would never forgive one's self for losing. You see, Mrs. Brett, for anything that I know, this first meeting of ours may be our last."

"Oh, I hope not," said Marcia, in her friendly way—and it was this friendly way of hers which had won her such a number of friends. "In London one can generally meet people whom one wants to meet, I think. Besides, if you care to call upon me, I shall be very glad to see you any Wednesday afternoon, when I am always at home."

She gave him her address, which he wrote down upon his shirt-cuff, beneath her portrait, and soon after that she went away. Archdale, who was

upon a footing of intimacy with his host and hostess, lingered until the other guests had departed, when he said—

"Your friend is simply divine! Who in the world is she?"

"Oh, she is human enough," answered Lord Wetherby, with a laugh. "She is the wife of the beak, and she is about the most confirmed flirt that I know; and if I were you, my young friend, I wouldn't attempt to captivate her, because that is a little game at which she can give you points and a beating."

"Don't believe him, Mr. Archdale," struck in Lady Wetherby, "he knows nothing at all about it. Marcia Brett, who is one of my oldest friends, is no more a flirt than I am. It isn't her fault that her cantankerous old husband chooses to shut himself up, and it isn't her fault that she is beautiful, or that men who ought to know better fall in love with her. I hope you are not going to be so silly, Mr. Archdale. If you are, and if you imagine that she will ever care a straw about you, you will be disappointed, I am afraid."

"My dear Lady Wetherby," replied the young artist, "the mischief is already done; I am desperately in love with her. Oh, you needn't look so shocked; there's nothing wrong about it;

my love is purely platonic, and I haven't the slightest hope of its being returned. All the same, I hope the beak isn't a jealous husband."

Lady Wetherby did not smile. She knew that this young man, whose familiarity her good-natured husband had encouraged to an extent of which she did not entirely approve, had the reputation of being a lady-killer, and she also knew that Marcia, if not a flirt, was not always so circumspect as her friends could have wished her to be.

"I don't think Mr. Brett is jealous," she said coldly. "At any rate, I am sure that he has no reason to be so."

Lord Wetherby stuck his hands in his pockets and walked up and down the room, whistling softly.

"Come and smoke a cigar before you go, Archdale," said he. "Laura is such a good woman herself that she thinks other women must be like her. They ain't, though."

CHAPTER IV.

MARCIA'S SON.

LORD WETHERBY was perhaps a little unfair in describing Marcia Brett as a flirt; yet he was not alone in holding that opinion of her. Of course all depends upon the meaning which may be attached to the word "flirtation;" but a pretty woman who prefers the society of the other sex to that of her own can hardly expect to escape censure, and Marcia had not escaped it, in spite of her discretion. It may be that she had been discreet for the simple reason that no man had as yet succeeded in touching her heart; but several had made the attempt, and with a great many she had had periods of close intimacy. She frankly confessed that she liked men, and that she did not, as a general rule, like women. Of the latter, some had scandalized her, some had deceived her, while almost all had made her acquainted with the little spites and meannesses which are too apt to disfigure feminine nature. "With men," she was wont to say, "you know at

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least where you are. They can't deceive you, and they very seldom try. But I have never yet met a woman, except Laura Wetherby, of whom I should dare to make a friend."

With ladies, therefore, experience had taught her to be upon her guard; but in other respects she was little changed at the age of twenty-eight from what she had been at eighteen. She had the same warm affections, the same intense longing to be loved, or at all events liked, the same youthful capacity for enjoying herself. And what change there was in her appearance was (as she perceived with joy from a daily and careful study of her features in the looking-glass), rather in the nature of an improvement. She had had some troubles and anxieties; but these had passed away without leaving any of the indelible traces by which the countenances of nervous persons are so often scored; she certainly did not look her age, and there seemed to be ground for hope that she had still many years of juvenility before her.

As she was being driven homewards in her brougham, she experienced that pleasant feeling of anticipation and excitement which the acquisition of a new acquaintance always gave her. She knew very well that she had produced an impression upon Mr. Archdale, and he, on his side, had pro-

duced a certain impression upon her. He was, at any rate, something of a novelty. The young men whom she had hitherto taken up and invited to dinner, and associated with until she and they had grown mutually tired of one another, had been very nice in their way, but had somewhat lacked variety. They had all belonged to the class which shoots in autumn, hunts in winter, attends the principal races in summer, and is more or less in London at every season of the year. She had at one time tried to make something of the gentlemen learned in the law whom Mr. Brett occasionally brought home with him, but had found them quite impossible. She had therefore been forced to fall back upon the well-dressed youths whom her husband, without much discrimination, stigmatized as "mashers," and whom he regarded with ill-concealed aversion. Marcia regretted this; because, although Mr. Brett was not a jealous man, it made her uncomfortable to see him looking so cruelly bored; added to which, he would not permit any addition to be made to her visiting-list without his previous sanction.

Well, anyhow he would like Mr. Archdale, she hoped. He could not call that eminent artist a masher, or speak of him as an utterly useless member of the community. If there was one

thing that Eustace respected it was intellect; and she herself was beginning to think that a little display of intellect would be welcome, by way of a change. She really wished to please her husband when she could; and so, after reaching Cornwall Terrace, she entered his study with a smile upon her lips; for this time, at all events, she would be able to tell him that she had made a new friend from whose conversation some improvement might be derived.

He was sitting at his big writing-table, with a shaded lamp by his side and a pile of books and notes before him. At the sound of the opening door he turned his head, and, on catching sight of his wife, sighed rather wearily. He had become quite an old man; the little hair that he had left was grey, and his thin cheeks were deeply wrinkled. "Well," he said, "have you had a pleasant evening?"

This was what he invariably said when she came in, and the eternal question generally irritated her, not only because it was rather silly in itself, but because she knew that he never paid any attention to her reply. On the present occasion she made no reply at all, but said: "How tired you look! Why do you sit up working like this?"

"I am not more tired than usual," he answered

peevishly; "nor am I working. I was only looking up the authorities upon a point which was raised to-day in the Court of Queen's Bench, and which—but you wouldn't understand."

He pushed away his books and papers, with another sigh, turned his chair so as to face that in which she had seated herself, and passed his hand over his forehead. "Let me see," he said; "where have you been to-night? Oh, to Lady Wetherby's, wasn't it? I suppose you met the usual nonentities?"

"Yes," answered Marcia, yawning and drawing off her long gloves; "most of them were what you call nonentities. May I have something to drink, if I am not interrupting you?"

She was interrupting him, and he looked as if he thought so; but he replied politely, "Not at all," and rang the bell for Apollinaris.

"There was one rather brilliant exception, though," Marcia resumed; "Mr. Archdale, the artist, you know."

"Archdale? Oh, yes, the man who apes Meissonnier in a humble way. Yes; I have been told to admire the pictures that he exhibits. So he was brilliant, was he?"

"Not offensively so. He seemed to be pleasant and clever, and I thought of asking him to dinner some night, if you don't mind."

"More dinner-parties!" sighed Mr. Brett. "We have had four in the last fortnight."

"Yes; but three of them were in one week, and it is impossible to go on accepting everything and doing nothing in return."

"Oh, of course," said Mr. Brett, "if you start upon the presumption that everything must be accepted——"

Marcia gave her shoulders a little impatient jerk. All this had been said so often before, and she had explained so many times that one cannot pick and choose, that one must either accept hospitality or refuse it! Her husband, for his part, was fully aware of the futility of the protests which he could not refrain from making. He was not convinced that it was necessary to entertain as much as they did, and the expense of their entertainments had become a source of anxiety to him; yet, since his wife's income was now equivalent to his own, he did not feel justified in prohibiting her from spending it as she pleased. After a pause, he said—

"If Lady Wetherby receives Mr. Archdale, that may be taken as a guarantee of respectability, I suppose. By all means ask him. He cannot be more inane than the others, and he may possibly be less so."

"He is not in the least like the others," Marcia declared, "and if only you could divest your mind of the prejudice that you always have against any friend of mine, I believe you would find him an agreeable companion. That is why I wanted to cultivate his acquaintance, because, after all, I would rather invite people to the house whom you could get on with, if I did but know where to find them."

"The difficulty, no doubt," observed Mr. Brett, with a faint smile, "is to find people who can get on with me. But perhaps if Mr. Archdale decides to honour us with his company, it will not be for my sake; so that my unsociability is of no great consequence."

"I don't see why you should determine in advance to be unsociable," said Marcia.

"You mean, perhaps, that you don't see why I should recognize an indisputable fact. But the recognition of facts has always been my strong point, whereas it is scarcely yours."

After this there was another long pause, during which Mr. Brett looked wistfully at his books, while Marcia sipped her Apollinaris meditatively. She knew that he wanted to get rid of her; but for some reason or other she felt more anxious to conciliate him that night than usual; so she

lingered on, and at length—for she could think of nothing better to say—she asked, "What have you been doing all day, Eustace?"

"What do I do every day?" he returned. "I sat in Court until the usual hour; then I went to the club for a little; then I came home and dined by myself——"

"That was your own choice," interrupted Marcia.

"Of course it was my own choice. And since dinner I have been reading and writing."

"It does seem to me to be a great pity that you should choose to lead such a life," Marcia said. "You don't like it, it doesn't agree with you, and I don't believe it would agree with anybody. If you had gone to the Wetherby's with me to-night they would have been very pleased to see you."

"You think so? I have my doubts as to that; but I have no doubt at all that it wouldn't have pleased me to see them."

"Yet you profess to have such an admiration and esteem for Laura Wetherby."

"I think Lady Wetherby is an excellent woman who performs her duties unexceptionably. In her position it is one of her duties to give dinner-parties. But it is not one of mine to attend them."

"Are you so certain of that? Some people would say that it is a husband's duty to be seen at least occasionally with his wife."

Mr. Brett's pale cheeks turned paler, which was always a sign of anger with him. "I thought," he replied coldly, "that we had long ago come to an understanding upon that point. I have no inclination for society, and if I had, my health would not allow me to turn night into day. Under the circumstances, I might perhaps have told you that I did not wish you to go out without me, and requested you to make some sacrifice of your tastes to mine; but, for various reasons, I thought it right that you should be free to decide for yourself in the matter. I have not quarrelled with your decision; but the case will be somewhat altered if I am to understand that you expect me to station myself at the top of a staircase all night while you are dancing."

"You know very well that I never said anything of the sort, Eustace," returned Marcia, with tears of indignation in her eyes. "I never thought of asking you to go to balls; but I do think that if you would sometimes consent to dine out, you would be a little less—less morose and disagreeable than you are now."

"For Heaven's sake!" exclaimed Mr. Brett

irritably, "let us avoid the use of uncivil adjectives. If your suggestion was prompted by a desire for my mental or physical advantage, I am really very much obliged to you, though I doubt the efficacy of the means prescribed; but what you said was that it was my duty to be seen with you."

"I said some people might think so; but it doesn't matter. I suppose you will go your way and I shall go mine until the end of the chapter. Probably that is the best plan."

"I confess," said Mr. Brett, leaning back in his chair and folding his hands, "that it appears to me to be the only practicable plan."

Marcia left the room, vexed and disheartened, for she hated to be repulsed; yet, underlying the mortification of which she was conscious, there was a certain unacknowledged feeling of relief. She had done her best—she was always doing her best; she had made advances and, as usual, they had been disdained. If, some day or other, consequences should ensue which Eustace might not like, he would only have his own obstinate hostility to thank. She did not say this to herself, but the thought was in her heart all the same.

On the landing at the top of the stairs she met a short, middle-aged lady in a flannel dressing-gown, who said apologetically, "I am afraid we

are very late to-night. The truth is that Willie set his heart upon seeing you when you came in, and nothing would induce him to go to sleep. So I have been reading to him."

This was Miss Wells, the governess to whom Willie's education had been entrusted. She was a worthy, kind-hearted woman, devoted to her charge, who was devoted to her, but who tyrannized over her. Mr. Brett thought her a fool—as possibly she may have been—and Mrs. Brett loved her because she loved the boy, but was sometimes a little jealous of her. Perhaps she was a little jealous of her now, for she said—

"Oh, Miss Wells, you ought not to keep him awake so long. Of course, I can never tell whether I shall get home early or late."

"He is fast asleep now," Miss Wells answered. "I tried him with Hans Andersen's Fairy tales; but that was no use at all, so I fell back upon Russell's 'History of Modern Europe,' which I have seldom known to fail. He didn't see you before you went out to-night," she added, by way of excusing herself and him.

The excuse seemed to be considered sufficient; for Marcia smiled and wished Miss Wells good night without further remonstrance. She opened the door of her son's room softly, and stole in,

shading her bedroom candle with her hand. The boy had tossed the bedclothes off him; he was lying with one arm under his head and the other outstretched by his side, the palm of the hand upwards; his closed eyes displayed to advantage the long dark lashes of which his mother was so proud; his rounded cheeks had the faint flush which slumber brings in childhood; his parted lips were curved into the smile which seldom deserted them, whether he was awake or asleep. Willie Brett was now nine years old, and it was certain that he would have to be sent to school before long, though his mother could not bear to think of that. He was hardly to be called a pretty boy, nor was there much prospect of his growing up into a handsome man; nevertheless he had a charming face, and one person in the world, at least, was prepared to maintain against all comers that no conceivable change in him could partake of the nature of an improvement.

Marcia stood gazing at him in rapt admiration for some minutes, and as she looked, she forgot all about the stern, unsympathetic student of law downstairs, all about the fascinating Mr. Archdale, and all about her numerous engagements for the morrow, which, as a general rule, claimed her last waking thoughts. She was quite sure that she

did not really care for anything or anybody a tenth part as much as she did for her boy; and it may be that she was not mistaken, for when one thinks of the person whom one loves best, it is customary and allowable to withdraw one's self from the competition. Well, she could not go to bed without giving Willie one kiss; so she bent over him and just touched his warm cheek with her lips. That should not have been enough to disturb anybody's slumbers; but perhaps his were not very deep, for he stirred, stretched himself, yawned, and finally opened his eyes. He winked and blinked for a second or two; then the smile upon his lips grew broader, he broke into a low laugh, and said, as if imparting a piece of information which might possibly astonish his hearer, "I've been asleep."

"Yes, and you must go to sleep again, dear," his mother answered. "It's the middle of the night, and I didn't mean to wake you. I'm going away now."

"Oh no, don't go," pleaded the boy, who had struggled into a sitting posture; "if you do, I shall lie awake for ever so long. Stay just five minutes and talk." He added, after a brief scrutiny of her: "How pretty you look!"

"Do you think so?" said Marcia, smiling back

at him and letting her cloak fall from her shoulders, so as to show her diamonds.

"You are always pretty, Mummy," answered the boy; "don't you know you are? Come and sit down close beside me and tell me about the dinner. It was a dinner to-night, wasn't it?"

Marcia nodded and did as she was requested, taking the boy's warm hands in her own, which had grown a little chilly in the course of that interview with her husband.

"Nice people?" Willie inquired.

"Oh, pretty well—not particularly," his mother replied. "Yes, there was one whom I rather liked."

"What was his name?" asked the juvenile inquisitor; and it was a little significant that he was in no doubt as to the sex of the individual who had been so fortunate as to please his mother.

"He was a Mr. Archdale, an artist," Marcia answered. "Upon second thoughts, I'm not sure that I did like him so very much. I don't often meet artists, so that he was a novelty; but he hadn't a great deal to say about art."

"Artists are rather muffs, aren't they?" suggested Willie. "What *did* he say? Did he tell you how pretty you looked?"

"No," answered Marcia, laughing, "he didn't

say anything so nice as that; it is only you who always say nice things, Willie. Oh dear! I wish we could go away to some desert island—just you and I—and never be heard of again."

"*I* shouldn't mind," observed Willie meditatively; "but I expect you would get tired of it after a bit. Oh yes, you would want new dresses, and—and new people to talk to, and all that."

"I suppose I should," agreed Marcia, sighing. "Well, we mustn't talk any more nonsense now. Good night, my darling!"

She threw her arms round the boy and kissed him again and again. Then she held him at a little distance from her, looking into his eyes. There were tears in her own; though she could not have explained the cause of them.

"Willie," she said, "do you love me best in the world—quite best?"

"*Quite* best," Willie replied unhesitatingly.

"Better than Miss Wells?"

He laughed at the absurdity of the question. "Oh, Miss Wells! She is an old dear; but she isn't *you*, Mummy."

Marcia smiled; but her smile soon faded away. "How dreadful it is," she exclaimed, "to think that a day will come—*must* come—when you won't love me best any longer! I shan't be 'Mummy'

then, and I shan't be pretty; I shall be 'Mother' and an ugly old woman, from whom you will conceal all sorts of things. It hasn't come yet, though. Perhaps, after all, I may die before it comes."

She left the room without waiting to hear Willie's protestations. It is useless to protest against the immutable laws of human nature, and although we sometimes try to persuade ourselves that they may be suspended in our particular case, we always know in our hearts that they cannot be.

CHAPTER V.

MR. ARCHDALE IS SATISFIED.

Cecil Archdale was frequently spoken of by his friends as the most fortunate man in England. They had reasons which seemed to be sufficient for calling him so, and he had, at any rate, one great advantage over the general run of fortunate men in that he fully recognized and appreciated the fact of his good fortune. All his life long he had had things very much his own way; he had never wished for anything without getting it, so that he had come to regard immunity from disappointment as a sort of prerogative and took it for granted that he would succeed in any enterprise which he might think it worth while to undertake. No doubt this happy self-confidence had contributed not a little to his unvarying success. Handsome, pleasant-mannered, and always at his ease, he had readily made his way into the best society obtainable, wherever he had been; he had been universally liked and a good deal loved; as he had no near

relations nor anybody's convenience to consult, save his own, he had wandered over many foreign lands and had derived much amusement from his cosmopolitan experiences. It is true that he had habitually lived beyond his income and that at the end of eight years he had very nearly exhausted the comfortable little fortune which he had inherited from his father; but just as this was becoming a source of anxiety to him he had turned his artistic talents to account and had achieved a reputation which would have astonished nobody more than himself, had he not felt persuaded that this was due rather to the influence of his lucky star than to his skill or industry.

Nevertheless, he was skilful. He was also industrious, in the sense that he took great pains with his work and brought exquisite accuracy to bear upon the finish of details; but in no other sense. He was constitutionally indolent; he hated to begin anything new, and his fellow-labourers produced, on an average, half-a-dozen pictures in the time that it took him to produce one. Very likely this deliberation may have enhanced the price and even the value of his handiwork; but it was not for that reason that he spent so many hours contentedly in smoking cigarettes and doing nothing. He was very fond of doing nothing—fonder, perhaps, of

that than of anything else in the world, except making love. The latter amusement is doubtless agreeable to the generality of mortals; only for most of us its delights are considerably marred by reason of the uncertainties and anxieties by which it is beset. With such drawbacks the fortunate Cecil Archdale had no acquaintance. The women with whom he fell in love invariably fell in love with him, and what was better still was that his numerous philanderings never led to serious or painful consequences. "These things die a natural death," he was wont to say. "It seems a pity that they should: but perhaps it would be a still greater pity if they didn't. I can't imagine a more awful fate than having to spend one's life with a person whom one had once adored and couldn't manage to adore any longer."

By good luck or good guidance, he had steered clear of any such fate. Moreover, he had steered clear of conceit or affectation; and this was generally held to be creditable to him. If he believed himself to be irresistible, his belief had the support of a tolerably large experience. In truth he had little feeling of personal vanity in the matter; only a deeply rooted conviction that it was not his destiny to love in vain. He was perfectly sincere when he told Lady Wetherby that he had fallen

desperately in love with her friend Mrs. Brett; he was also quite sure that a delicate betrayal of his sentiments to Mrs. Brett herself would do neither her nor him any harm. His passions were too ephemeral for any harm to come of them. What usually came of them was a pleasant interview or two, a few enjoyable dances, perhaps the interchange of certain phrases which were not meant to be taken too literally, and then a gradual cooling off, brought about by the discovery of a substitute.

One afternoon, soon after Lady Wetherby's dinner-party, he was reclining upon a divan in the comfortable chambers near St. James's Street where he had set up his studio, and was expatiating to a friend of his upon the charms of the lady who had captivated him.

"It isn't only that she is beautiful," he was saying; "beauty isn't really rare, and when all is said and done, it is never mere beauty of face or form that appeals to one. But Mrs. Brett is rare, distinctly rare. She is a woman of the world to her finger-tips; and yet there is something about her, I don't know how to describe it, a sort of innocent hardihood which makes one long to——"

"To kiss her?" suggested the friend.

"Drake, you are no better than the beasts that perish! I wasn't going to say anything

of that sort: I was going to say that it made one long to warn her how dangerous it is to be hardy, even though one may be as innocent as an infant. Most men—you, for instance—entirely misunderstand such women."

"I suppose you understand Mrs. Brett perfectly, don't you?"

"Not at all; I understand her very imperfectly as yet. But I have sense enough to understand that she is as good as she is charming, and that when she shows herself kindly disposed towards a humble artist it isn't because she thinks it might amuse her to get up a flirtation with him."

"In other words, it is because she has really fallen a victim to the fascinations of the humble artist. Well, I dare say she has: I have observed that they generally do. Poor Mr. Brett!"

Archdale swung his legs off the sofa, faced his interlocutor and made an impatient gesture. "I really don't see why you should pity Mr. Brett," he said. "I have made some inquiries about him, and I have heard just what I expected to hear. He is a dry, solemn, cold-hearted old lawyer; he neglects his wife, and he doesn't care a little bang whether she is happy or miserable. If you imagine that I shall ever have the honour of causing him a moment's anxiety, that is because you don't

know much about either him or me. But you are hopelessly material, Drake; you haven't a particle of romance or refinement in the whole of your great hulking carcase."

The individual addressed did not appear to resent this uncomplimentary description of himself. He only laughed and said that people afflicted with hulking carcases could not be expected to be refined or romantic. He was a middle-aged man, tall, stout, and loosely built; his hair was turning grey at the temples; his moustache, it might be surmised, would also have been grey, had not artificial means been resorted to to obliterate the footprints of time. He looked good-natured, as indeed he was, and a practised observer would have guessed that he was not vexed by any rigid code of morality. Alfred Drake had more friends than perhaps he deserved to have. He passed for a good fellow and was not a very bad one; though it was noticeable that those whom he chose for his friends were people who were likely to be of service to him in one way or another. Cecil Archdale, who had already been of some service to him, would, he hoped, be of service to him again. In fact, that was why he was now listening so patiently to the praises of a lady whom he neither knew nor was ambitious of knowing. By

way of summing up the subject and changing it, he remarked presently—

"Well, I won't pity Mr. Brett, if you had rather I didn't; but I will make so bold as to congratulate you. It's a fine thing to be the rising artist of the day, and it isn't so bad to be young and good-looking and rich. As for me, I am resigned to being rather old and rather ugly; but I am not altogether resigned to being confoundedly poor. Therefore, my dear Archdale, I wish with all my heart that I were you."

"Oh, I'm not rich," said Archdale.

"Are you rich enough to lend a couple of hundred to a distressed friend for a few weeks?" inquired the other smilingly. "If you are, the distressed one would sleep comfortably to-night and would remember you in his prayers before turning in."

Perhaps it was because he obtained without any difficulty a sum which he had not the smallest prospect of being able to repay, that Mr. Drake felt bound to make some immediate return for what he had received. For obvious reasons, he could not present his generous friend with anything expensive, but he could bestow something valuable upon him, in the shape of excellent advice, and this he did not grudge.

"Look here, Archdale," said he, as he rose from his chair, "if I were you I'd drop these little games. You'll burn your fingers some fine day, my boy. I dare say I'm coarse and material and all the rest of it; but that's just what circumstances very often are, and a precious awkward circumstance it will be for you to have a married woman rushing in here to tell you that she has quarrelled with her husband and come to throw herself upon your protection."

"Oh, go away!" exclaimed the young artist, laughing; "the only excuse for you is that you don't know what you are talking about."

Mr. Drake, having obtained the object of his visit, went away willingly enough; and shortly after his departure, Archdale, in no wise disturbed by the warning which had been addressed to him, sauntered out with the intention of leaving a card for Lady Wetherby. However, when he reached St. George's Place, he did not content himself with ringing the bell and pushing his card into the letter-box, after the unceremonious fashion affected by modern young men, but duly waited until the door was opened, and then asked whether Lady Wetherby was at home. Her ladyship, he was informed, was at home; and presently he was received with the kindliness which her ladyship

was accustomed to extend impartially to the just and to the unjust. He suspected that he was not altogether approved of by Lady Wetherby; but he felt sure that, by taking a little trouble, he could overcome any prejudice that she might have conceived against him, and he was desirous just now of securing her good opinion. Therefore he did not at once begin to talk about Mrs. Brett, but discussed a number of other persons in whom he was not greatly interested, and found something pleasant to say about all of them; so that eventually it was his hostess, not he, who introduced the subject upon which he wished for further information.

"I hope," said she, "that you didn't believe what Wetherby told you the other night about Marcia Brett. Of course you were only joking when you spoke of having fallen in love with her; but it is better not to say such things even in joke, I think, and I was sorry afterwards that I had called her husband cantankerous. The poor man has been very unfortunate, and his misfortunes have soured him, and he has bad health; but I believe Marcia is just as fond of him now as she was when she married him."

"And was she very fond of him then?"

"I don't know what other reason she could have

had for accepting him. She might easily have made a more brilliant match."

"He doesn't treat her over and above well, they say. But it's no business of mine, and I won't proclaim that I am in love with her again if you disapprove of it, Lady Wetherby. Still there is no objection to my cultivating her friendship, I presume."

Notwithstanding the pains at which he had been to conciliate her, this young man appeared to Lady Wetherby to be forward and rather ill-bred. She imagined that she was inflicting quite a severe rebuke upon him when she replied: "I really don't think that I have the right to object to any proceedings of yours, Mr. Archdale. I should require to know you much more intimately than I do before I could take such a liberty. I only did not wish you or anybody else to jump to mistaken conclusions about a very old friend of mine."

He rejoined, without a symptom of the shamefacedness which would have been becoming, "I assure you I haven't jumped to any conclusions at all about Mrs. Brett. As you say, one must know people intimately before one can venture upon such liberties; but I suppose there is no harm in my wishing to know her more intimately."

Lady Wetherby was not so sure of that. How-

ever, she was precluded from giving utterance to her views by the entrance of Mrs. Brett herself, who was now announced, and who, after embracing her friend, shook hands very cordially with Mr. Archdale.

Marcia was in excellent spirits that day. She was wearing a new frock which fitted her to perfection—always an exhilarating circumstance; she had just come from an afternoon assembly at which many pretty things had been said to her, and she had not seen her husband for twenty-four hours. She knew that she was looking her best, and very likely it was not displeasing to her that she should be studied under that aspect by an artist of discriminating taste.

However that may have been, she did not give the discriminating artist much chance of conversing with her. She seemed to become oblivious of his presence after she had greeted him, and half turned her back upon him while she chattered with Lady Wetherby upon topics which scarcely afforded an excuse for intervention on the part of a male listener. What did he know about the size and shape of bonnets and the all-important question of whether it was or was not true that the Princess of Wales had set her face against the introduction of those which were being worn in Paris? Nevertheless, he

knew (for his eyes were sharp and his wits were quick) that Mrs. Brett's attention was not so completely taken up with these matters as to render her unconscious of his admiring gaze. It was not until Lady Wetherby asked some casual question about Willie, that her manner suddenly changed and she appeared really to forget that there was a third person in the room.

"Oh, he is flourishing," she said, "he is always flourishing, I am thankful to say. Do you know what he did this morning? He actually went and jumped his pony over the railings in Regent's Park, and a policeman came up and made a great fuss and had to be tipped. I don't believe Willie knows what fear is!"

"Well, that is a very good thing," said Lady Wetherby good-humouredly; "but I should think he must be getting a little too much for Miss Wells, isn't he? When are you going to send him to school?"

Marcia's face fell. "Oh, I don't know," she answered; "please don't talk about it. It will break my heart when they take him away from me."

"It is a wrench, of course," Lady Wetherby agreed; "but sooner or later it has to be faced. Our boy goes to a preparatory school in the autumn,

and in two or three years he will be at Eton, I suppose. I hope you mean Willie to be an Etonian?"

"Yes," answered Marcia, with a sigh, "I believe that is decided upon. It isn't so much the thought of Eton that I dread as of that horrid preparatory place. I wonder whether it is really necessary! I often ask men about their boyhood, and they invariably tell me that they were happy when they went to a public school and miserable at the private one which came before it." Then she abruptly wheeled round and appealed to Archdale. "What was your experience?" she asked.

"Oh, I got on well enough at both schools, as far as I remember," he replied. "A little acquaintance with adversity isn't a bad thing for a boy, Mrs. Brett; though I dare say you'll call me hard-hearted for saying so. Besides, if your boy has good health and is plucky, as you say he is, he'll take care of himself."

And as, at this moment, two other visitors were announced who drew off Lady Wetherby's attention, he was able to pull his chair a little closer to Mrs. Brett's and to inquire, "Are you so intensely devoted to this son of yours?"

"More than to everybody else in the world put together," Marcia replied emphatically. "He is

everything to me and he always will be. But I shall not be everything to him when once he has left the nest, you see. That is really why I hate to think of his going to school. I am not afraid of his being bullied; because I am sure he wouldn't stand that."

"Then," said Archdale, with a laugh and a slight shrug of his shoulders, "since the thing is as inevitable as death, and since you hate thinking about it, let us think about something else. Will you be present at Lady Hampstead's pastoral play to-morrow by any chance?"

"Yes, I shall be there if it doesn't rain," answered Marcia. "And you?"

"Oh, I shall be there, even if it does. I have been helping her with her arrangements and costumes and so forth, and I shall expect you to pat me on the back if the thing turns out a success."

"It is sure to be a success; but shall I be allowed an opportunity of congratulating you? Won't you be concealed somewhere up a tree, directing the operations?"

"Very likely I shall; I don't quite know what is going to be done with me. But you won't rush away the moment that the play is over, will you?"

"Not unless I am obliged. I shall have to be

home in time to dress for dinner, though. And that reminds me that I ought to be at home now."

She gave him her hand once more and smiled pleasantly at him; so that he left the house soon afterwards in a contented mood. The beautiful Mrs. Brett had not, it was true, displayed anything more than friendliness towards him; but as he was not an unreasonable man, he was satisfied with that and with the prospect of meeting her again so soon. The only thing that had jarred a little upon him was the inordinate affection which she had professed for that embryo school-boy. It was quite right and proper that she should be fond of her child, since she had a child; but he would have been better pleased if she had had none. He wanted to think of her as a woman who was thoroughly unhappy at home, and he did not want to think of her as cherishing an inordinate affection for any human being.

CHAPTER VI.

LADY HAMPSTEAD'S GARDEN-PARTY.

It was Marcia's habit to breakfast in her bedroom, and it was Mr. Brett's habit to dispose of the first meal of the day in the dining-room, all by himself. The system is one which may safely be recommended to couples who are not in close sympathy with one another, and which is not to be despised even by lovers; for intercourse is always perilous at an hour when nine people out of ten feel both cross and stupid. However, Marcia always broke through her rule on Tuesday mornings, when the weekly bills came in, and when her husband, who insisted upon having the tradesmen's books submitted to him, was accustomed to hand her over the housekeeping money, sweetened by remarks upon the prodigality of the cook. The day following that treated of in the last chapter happened to be a Tuesday, and, as usual, she hastened downstairs to receive her cheque; but, although the bills were somewhat

higher than they ought to have been, Mr. Brett had no disagreeable comments to make upon that circumstance. She found him standing by his writing-table with his hat on, and as he held out the slip of paper which he had already signed, he said—

"Isn't it to-day that Lady Hampstead has a garden-party?—a sort of out-door theatrical performance, or something of that kind?"

"Yes, it is to-day," answered Marcia. "You won't come with me, of course?"

"I will try to be at home in time to accompany you. If I am not, you need not wait for me; but in all probability I shall be able to manage it."

She knew him well enough to know what this meant. He was one of the most conscientious of men; he had been thinking over what she had said to him about his abstention from social gatherings, and he had come to the conclusion that there was something to be urged in favour of her view of her husband's duties. Therefore he was now about to make a martyr of himself after a fashion which was especially distasteful to him.

"Please don't come to Lady Hampstead's on my account," she said; "you won't enjoy yourself, and, if you will excuse my saying so, you

may remain away without being missed. It is only at dinner parties that I am asked what has become of my husband: in the crowds nobody knows who is there and who isn't."

But he answered in his cold, deliberate way, "I think I ought sometimes to remind your friends that you are not yet a widow. My avocations will not allow me to frequent society regularly; but I have it in my power to take a half-holiday occasionally, and I propose to take one this afternoon."

It cannot be said that she was particularly anxious for his escort—he had taught her to do without that—but she was willing to submit to it, and at the appointed hour he was waiting for her in the hall, with a flower in his button-hole and a new pair of gloves in his hand.

Lady Hampstead, who owned a villa with extensive grounds in one of the suburbs of London, was the first to start a species of sylvan entertainment which has since become fashionable. Of course it is not nearly as comfortable to witness a drama in the open air as within four walls (where at least, if one is not free from draughts, one can keep one's feet dry and hear something of what the actors are saying); still anything in the shape of a novelty is always welcome, and Royalty

patronized Lady Hampstead, and her gardens were prettily laid out. Marcia, after a long, weary drive, in the course of which very few remarks were interchanged, was glad to find herself among a host of friends, and if she did not pay much attention to the performance which was being enacted before her, she admired the brightness and colour of the whole scene, while she was relieved to notice that Eustace had joined a knot of legal luminaries, who appeared to be entertaining him with that class of anecdote which appeals to the legal sense of humour and to nobody else's.

The representation was not so lengthy as had been apprehended by some of the audience or as the actors could have desired; for Lady Hampstead, who was aware that when several hundred people meet, their main object is to talk to one another, had instructed her stage-manager to cut out as much dialogue as could possibly be dispensed with, and that gentleman, having reasons of his own for wishing to be expeditious, obeyed her faithfully. As soon as he could escape from the compliments which greeted him after the company had broken up into groups, he made his way towards Mrs. Brett and expressed a hope that she had not been very much bored.

"Of course I haven't," she answered, smiling; "I don't think I ever saw anything so pretty. Besides, it is almost impossible to bore me."

He raised his eyebrows. "What a delightful person you must be to live with!" he remarked.

"Oh, that is another matter; what *I* meant was that anything in the shape of amusement is pretty sure to amuse me. At home I am occasionally morose. But then I am not very much at home at this time of year."

"I think your tastes must be a good deal like mine," said Archdale. "It seems to me that life is a thing to be enjoyed so long as enjoyment is possible. When one isn't enjoying one's self one is wasting invaluable hours which will never return."

"Yes," agreed Marcia meditatively; "but the question is whether we ought not to find enjoyment in the family circle."

"Oh, nobody ever can be happy merely because he thinks he ought to be happy. We can all do our duty, I suppose; but no power, human or divine, can make us imagine it is more pleasant to do it than not. Individually, I find that I am never quite so happy as when I am doing something that is a little bit wrong; not very wrong, you know, only slightly so." He added, with the

air of one who has suddenly made an interesting discovery: "Do you know, I am rather happy at the present moment."

"Well, you are doing nothing wrong at the present moment," returned Marcia, laughing somewhat nervously; "it isn't wrong to be talking to me, I hope."

He glanced at her and sighed and laughed also. "I hope not," he answered.

Of course she understood what he did not say. That kind of thing had been said to her, or hinted at, many and many a time before, but it had never before, that she could remember, made her blush. She was annoyed with herself for blushing, and still more annoyed with him for keeping his eyes upon her face when he ought to have averted them. To show him that the phenomenon which he had witnessed was due to purely physical causes, and that it was not really in his power to disconcert her, she said, "Why have you never been to call upon us, Mr. Archdale? I wanted to introduce you to my husband, who, I am sure, would be glad to make your acquaintance."

Cecil Archdale was not quite a gentleman, though he was a very passable imitation of one. His reply was, "I shall be only too delighted to call upon you; but I'm afraid I can't pretend that, when I

do call, it will be for the pleasure of making Mr. Brett's acquaintance."

The atrocious bad taste of this speech did not offend Marcia; she knew that her husband was not popular with other men, and she thought that his unpopularity was deserved. She said, "Eustace is clever, and can be agreeable when he chooses. He doesn't, as a rule, like my friends, because my friends, as a rule, are not clever people; but I think he would like you, and possibly you might like him. Perhaps you would come and dine quietly with us some evening. Are you doing anything next Sunday?"

Archdale replied that he believed he had an engagement, but that he could easily get rid of it; and while Marcia was protesting that he must not think of throwing anybody over for the dull little gathering which was all that she could offer him, her husband came up behind her and touched her elbow.

"Is it not time for us to be going?" asked Mr. Brett, who had his watch in his hand. "Don't hurry away on my account, only I understood you to say that you wished to be at home soon after seven o'clock."

Marcia started, and, to her great vexation, found herself blushing again. "I am quite ready," she

answered quickly. Then as Mr. Brett was turning on his heel, "Eustace," she said, "I want to introduce you to Mr. Archdale. Mr. Archdale has been kind enough to give me a half promise that he will dine with us on Sunday."

"Oh, it was a whole promise," the young artist declared; "and it will certainly be kept."

Mr. Brett raised his hat and surveyed the stranger coldly. "I am glad to hear that," said he, without looking glad. "I do not approve of Sunday dinner-parties because, in a small establishment like ours, I think the servants should be allowed one day of rest in a week; but I am told that they are unavoidable."

"It won't be a party, Eustace," interrupted Marcia.

"Oh! Still I presume that the servants will have to work as hard as if it were."

Marcia bit her lips and looked down, while Archdale, inwardly amused, wondered whether he ought to withdraw his acceptance of the invitation, and so relieve Mr. Brett's servants of a portion of their labour. But the latter gentleman, who may have felt that he had been a little uncivil, resumed, "Party or no party, we shall be very pleased to see you, Mr. Archdale, if you will honour us so far. I have been a humble admirer of your pictures for some time past."

There was an ironical inflection in his voice which did not escape Archdale, who answered good-humouredly enough, "My pictures are anything but admirable, as I dare say you know. It really isn't my fault if they are generally admired. I should have given up painting long ago but for the sordid consideration that I make my living by it."

"That is a very good reason for persevering with your occupation," observed Mr. Brett gravely. "Not every man can be a genius, but every man can work for his living. Indeed," he added, with a sigh, "work is the only thing worth living for."

He was thinking of himself, not of his interlocutor, and was quite unconscious of having said anything rude; but his words chanced to irritate both his wife and her friend, who exchanged a quick glance while he was speaking. Work the only thing worth living for?—what a view to take of existence!

"Is the carriage there?" asked Marcia, in a tone of impatient resignation, with which her husband was only too familiar. "If it is, we may as well go now."

Mr. Brett extended a thin dry hand to the artist. "We will expect you on Sunday, then," said he.

"Thanks," answered Archdale briefly; and per-

haps if he had been discreet or even well-bred, he would not have drawn Mrs. Brett aside a few paces and whispered laughingly, "It seems that I am not quite clever enough, and that I must be content to take my place amongst your other friends. Well, I don't think I very much mind."

Marcia responded by a slight grimace, the meaning of which was open to various interpretations. Leaving Archdale to place what construction he might please upon it, she walked quickly across the grass to say good-bye to her hostess, Mr. Brett following her at a slower pace.

After she had seated herself in the victoria beside her husband, and was being driven back towards London, she remained silent for some little time, while he also was apparently preoccupied with his own reflections. But at length, although she knew that it would have been much wiser to hold her peace, she could not help asking, "Had you any particular reason for being rude to Mr. Archdale, Eustace?"

"I am not aware of having been rude to him," Mr. Brett replied tranquilly. "In what way was I rude?"

"It is scarcely polite to tell a man he is not a genius."

"Really, I think it would have been scarcely

polite to tell him that he was ; if I had done that, he would surely have had sense enough to suspect me of laughing at him."

"Oh, I doubt whether anybody would ever suspect you of laughing. Mr. Archdale may not be a genius, and he may know that he isn't, but I don't see what necessity there was for calling his attention to a fact which he hadn't denied. I suppose you would think it a little rude of a stranger to tell you emphatically that you were not handsome."

Mr. Brett winced perceptibly. Of course, he was not handsome, and perhaps at his age it would not have made much difference if he had been. Nevertheless, she had hit him on the raw, and what made the cut smart more was that he felt sure it had been inflicted deliberately. It was not often that Marcia made such speeches, but when she did, the effect was always to make him wish himself dead. But he answered, without apparent emotion—

"I am sorry if I inadvertently hurt your friend's feelings ; I ought to have remembered that artists are apt to be sensitive. Naturally, I could have no motive for wishing to affront him, since I neither know nor care to know anything in the world about the man."

"That means that you have taken a dislike to him. I wonder why?"

"I confess that he did not impress me favourably," answered Mr. Brett, with deliberation. "His manners did not strike me as those of a gentleman."

He only said what he thought—and for the matter of that, his impression was perfectly accurate—but Marcia not unnaturally imagined that he had selected intentionally the kind of criticism which was most certain to annoy her. "Different people have different ideas of what a gentleman's manners ought to be, I suppose," she rejoined. "I should have thought that he might have complained of yours, and that you had not very much to complain of in his."

"I am probably old-fashioned," said her husband. "When I was a child I was taught that it was bad manners to whisper; but no doubt you have changed all that."

Marcia, having no adequate retort ready, threw herself back in the carriage and gazed at the misty landscape. It was beautiful summer weather; but beautiful summer weather in the neighbourhood of London usually implies a point or two of east in the wind and a consequent indistinctness of distant outlines. She was thinking to herself that

she was very tired of London, and that everybody was more or less of a bore, and that her husband was the most disagreeable man of her acquaintance, and that she would like to go somewhere far, far away with Willie and begin a new life, from which petty snappings and bickerings should be eliminated, when the harsh sound of Mr. Brett's voice recalled her once more to actualities.

"For some time past," said he, and he spoke as if what he had to say was a very ordinary matter, "I have been making inquiries about a preparatory school for Willie, and I have now heard of one near Farnborough which seems to be satisfactory in all respects. Perhaps you will tell Miss Wells that her services will be no longer required, although I shall be very glad for her to remain with us until she can find some fresh employment."

Marcia turned white. She had known that her boy must shortly be taken from her, but she had supposed that she would at least be consulted before any definite arrangement was made, and she had not imagined that Mr. Brett was interesting himself at all in the matter.

"You might have told me before!" she exclaimed, catching her breath. And then, with a slight air of relief, "Of course, he can't go to school until the autumn now."

"Well, yes," resumed Mr. Brett; "it so chances that there is a vacancy at present, and I find that there will be no objection to his being received in about a fortnight's time." He added, for Marcia's face of consternation touched him, though he did not appear to be touched: "Believe me, it is better for you and for him that the separation should be accomplished quickly. I can understand that it is painful for a mother to part with her only child; nevertheless, what is right and necessary must be done, and the less hesitation there is about doing it the less suffering there will be. I am not sure whether you will take my word for it that I have conducted these negotiations privately in order to spare you, but such is the fact."

"You always show so much delicate consideration for my feelings that I haven't the slightest difficulty about taking your word in this instance," answered Marcia bitterly.

He did not defend himself, nor indeed would it have been worth his while to attempt so hopeless a task; for nothing could have shaken his wife's conviction that he had acted as he had done out of sheer malignancy. She fully recognized that he was master, and that it was for him to decide how his son's education should be conducted; but

it is only a very bad master who rules by cracking the whip, and if such a one fancies that he will be loved by his subordinates, he knows little of human nature. At that moment Marcia hated her husband; and although it is possible that she may have hated him before, she had never before admitted as much to herself. She had now, she thought, a good reason for hating him: it may be that she was not altogether sorry to be so equipped.

However, she did not say much; she was, in truth, too miserable to indulge in useless recriminations. Her chief desire was to keep herself from crying; for she did not want the man to know how much he had hurt her. But, when she once had got rid of him, there was no reason why she should not cry to her heart's content; and even the fear of appearing at a dinner-party with a red nose did not deter her from giving way to her emotions as soon as she was safely in her bedroom, with the door locked. And how could she leave the house without telling Willie the dreadful news? It gave the poor woman a sharp pain at her heart to find that the news was not so very dreadful to Willie, after all. He was a little startled when he heard how soon he was to be launched forth into the world and left to fight

his own battles; but he did not much mind going to school—all boys went to school.

"And I shall come home for the holidays, you know," he added consolingly; for he seemed to have a precocious comprehension of the fact that his mother was one who rather stood in need of protection than was capable of affording it.

He did not, and could not, understand the kind of protection which she required, but possibly she did; for she exclaimed in accents of despair, "Yes, you will come back, my own dear! But you will not be the same again, it isn't possible! And, when I get home at night and your room is empty, and my boy is gone from me for ever, I don't know—oh, I don't know what will become of me!"

CHAPTER VII.

A SUNDAY DINNER-PARTY.

Miserable though Marcia was when she thought of the bereavement which was about to be inflicted upon her, she pursued her daily round of so-called pleasures with a countenance which betrayed little or nothing of her inward sadness. To conceal our feelings is a lesson which most of us learn early in life, and she had learnt it, notwithstanding her small natural aptitudes in that direction. Moreover, she could not and did not expect any sympathy from those about her. Even Miss Wells, after wiping away a tear, was fain to confess that it was high time for Willie to be placed under stricter discipline than she was able to enforce. "He is a dear boy," she said, "and it breaks my heart to leave him; but the truth is, Mrs. Brett, that he is growing too big to be controlled by women. Men are our natural masters, and they know it, and a boy of nine is a little man—that is, if he is worth anything. You need not be afraid

about him ; he is brave and honest, and if he earns a few whippings, as I dare say he will, he has sense of justice enough to submit to them, and be all the better for them."

All this was very true and very sensible ; but it did not console Marcia, who was quite aware that her son was at least as capable as other women's sons of finding his own level. What weighed upon her heart day and night like a load of lead was the knowledge that henceforth she must be utterly lonely. Neither Miss Wells nor Eustace, nor anybody else, would have understood why Willie's impending departure should make her dread the future; she herself only understood it, after a vague sort of fashion ; but the dread was none the less real, because it could not be talked about, and was not susceptible of strict definition.

Two days after Lady Hampstead's garden-party, her husband said to her: "I have asked George and Caroline to dine with us on Sunday. As your friend Mr. Archdale is to come, two additional guests will not entail much extra trouble. I don't know whether you have invited anybody else."

Marcia shook her head. "I thought you objected to Sunday dinner-parties," she answered, "and it is too late now to look out for some kindred spirits

to meet George and Caroline. How they will enjoy themselves!—and how we shall enjoy having them!"

"Strange as it may appear to you," said Mr. Brett, "it is a pleasure to me to see my brother and his wife from time to time. They do not, of course, belong to your set, and naturally their company is not agreeable to you. However, you will be able to talk to the artist, who does, I suppose, belong more or less to your set. As we shall be an uneven number, perhaps you might request Miss Wells to join us at dinner."

"Oh, by all means," answered Marcia. "It is rather hard upon poor Miss Wells; but, fortunately she has an inexhaustible supply of patience and good nature."

Marcia's own supply of those excellent qualities was not inexhaustible, and her sister-in-law had long ago reached the end of it. Lady Brett (the banker had, for some reason which may have been as good as another, received the honour of knighthood) was a devout woman, whose liberality and charity had earned renown for her in certain circles, and who, like some other devout persons, was liberal and charitable in a pecuniary sense only. She was sorry for poor Eustace, and had an exasperating way of showing how sorry she was for

him. Of his wife's conduct she was unable to approve, nor had her conscience permitted her to refrain from expressing disapproval thereof. Consequently, there had been family dissensions, followed by half-hearted reconciliations and a prolonged period of armed truce. As for Sir George, he was sorry for his brother, as successful men are apt to be for those who have not proved successful in life. To end one's days as a mere Police-magistrate, when one might have been a wealthy banker, is doubtless a melancholy result of wilfulness; but Sir George was very magnanimous about it, never reminding Eustace of bygone prophecies which had been justified by events, and endeavouring to conceal the contempt which he could not help feeling for a broken-down aspirant to high honours. Of the two, Marcia infinitely preferred Sir George. He was purse-proud, overbearing, and, with regard to any subject unconnected with business, ludicrously ignorant and stupid; but at least he was not malevolent. Caroline, on the other hand, had the sour spitefulness which is not uncommon among rich women who have no children and who have failed to make their way into society. Caroline affected to rail at society, and, in so far as she was able, kept a watchful eye upon her sister-in-law's proceedings. It was this, more than

anything else, that made Marcia hate a lady whom her husband respected, or pretended to respect; and certain previous experiences caused her to believe that Lady Brett had been asked to dinner for the especial purpose of keeping a watchful eye upon the proceedings of Mr. Archdale.

Now, although she was quite wrong there, for her husband would as soon have thought of opening her letters or looking through the keyhole of her door as of setting anybody to spy upon her, she was not mistaken in imagining that it was Lady Brett's intention to study the handsome artist carefully. Through some channel or other—Heaven only knows how women manage to hear of these things, but they always do hear of them—Lady Brett had received information to the effect that Mr. Archdale had been somewhat marked in his attentions to Marcia, and if there was anything of which Lady Brett was as sure as she was of death and of her own ultimate translation to a higher sphere, it was that sooner or later Marcia's flirtations would have a tragic end. That being so, it might have seemed to a person of logical mind a waste of labour to fight against the inevitable; but Lady Brett thought that one should always do one's duty, however little chance there might be of earning a temporal reward thereby. And indeed it

was on that account that she was dining with her brother-in-law on Sunday, notwithstanding the many good reasons which she had for withholding her countenance from any desecration of the day of rest.

Not being predisposed in Archdale's favour, the good lady thought it just like his impertinence to be half an hour late and to offer no apology for having kept his seniors waiting. When he was presented to her, she made herself agreeable by remarking, "If you had been dining with me, Mr. Archdale, I should have given up all hope of you some time ago."

To which he replied imperturbably, "Oh! do you go in for punctuality? Well, if you ever do honour me with an invitation to dinner, I'll bear it in mind."

He could not understand why he had been asked to meet these people, and he was not a little disappointed when he found that nobody else was expected. Surely Mrs. Brett could not have supposed that it would amuse him to take part in the general conversation; yet she must have known that with only six people assembled round the dinner-table it would be impossible for him to talk to her privately. However, he was placed on her right hand, and if he was precluded from

talking to her as he could have wished to talk, he did not at least feel bound to talk to anybody else. Miss Wells ate her dinner and forgave him; for Miss Wells, who was over fifty years of age, preferred a good dinner to any intellectual treat which this young disciple of Meissonier might have been able to afford her. Moreover, the dinner was excellent, and Marcia was charming. She very soon gave him to understand that the company was not of her choosing; from time to time she made some remark to him in an undertone which caused him to feel that he already stood upon the footing of an intimate friend, and she favoured him with a slight grimace while Sir George Brett, with slow and pompous utterance, discussed the various schools of painting of the epoch.

Sir George, whose absolute ignorance of art was accompanied by the courage which traditionally belongs thereto, said some marvellously foolish things, but said them with such perfect and evident self-satisfaction that nobody possessed of the faintest sense of humour could have felt annoyed with him for being a fool. Unlike his wife, he saw no reason to snub a budding celebrity, and even went so far as to hint that he had still room for a picture or two in his country house.

"Not very big ones; but yours are never very big, are they, Mr. Archdale?"

"They would be, if it were the custom to pay us by the piece," answered Archdale; "but as that system hasn't been adopted yet, I stick to small canvases and large frames."

"Yes, yes; a small canvas will hold a good many figures, and so will a small cheque," laughed this Mæcenas of a banker, with an encouraging nod, while Lady Brett, from the other end of the table, remarked dryly that the cost of a picture is not necessarily a criterion of its merit.

All this was disagreeable enough to Marcia, who made such amends to her guest as it was in her power to make. These he appeared to find satisfactory, and it did not interfere with his comfort in any way to be aware that on the opposite side of the table was seated a plain-featured, middle-aged woman who was staring at him with an unfriendly air and straining her ears in vain to catch his whispered words. By his way of thinking, ugly old women were simple nonentities. What could it possibly signify whether they liked or disliked you? It was sufficient for him that a young and beautiful woman was exerting herself to please him, and what gave him a much more severe snub than Lady Brett could ever have

inflicted was that upon him when Willie appeared, together with the dessert, the young and beautiful woman seemed suddenly to lose all consciousness of his vicinity.

The brat (it was thus that Archdale mentally stigmatized this intruder) was kissed by his aunt, and surreptitiously wiped off the trace of the salute with his sleeve while making his way round the table to his mother's side. Then Sir George, who had had as much champagne as is required to promote good-humoured jocularity, caught him by the ear, and said, "Well, young man, so they're going to chuck you down into the bear-pit, I hear. High time, too! If you haven't learnt how to use your fists yet, the sooner you learn the better."

Willie smiled shyly and slipped away without answering. He knew instinctively (as boys always do) that this loud-voiced uncle of his did not belong to the fighting variety of the human species, and he did not care to protest that he was ready for any future conflicts which might be in store for him.

But Marcia's cheeks reddened and her eyes sparkled; for her brother-in-law's speech seemed to her cruel and brutal.

"Schools are not bear-pits," she said.

"Ain't they though!" returned Sir George,

laughing. "Well, I can't say what they may be nowadays; but I know what they were in my time. Tossed in a blanket till you knocked your head and knees against the ceiling, and kicked round the playground till you were black and blue all over—eh, Eustace?"

"I do not remember to have passed through any such experiences," answered Mr. Brett, in his matter-of-fact way.

"Oh! you don't, don't you?" returned his brother, slightly disconcerted. "But then your memory is failing you, my dear fellow! I've noticed that in many things. *I* remember passing through plenty of experiences of that kind—and worse ones too."

"How you must have howled for mercy!" remarked Marcia. Then, fearing lest she should be betrayed into saying something unpardonable, she made a hurried signal to her sister-in-law and left the room.

Miss Wells slipped quietly away to the school-room. Miss Wells passed for being a simple creature—and so, perhaps, she was—yet her simplicity was not so great but that she could perceive the imminence of a row, and at her time of life she preferred to keep out of rows, when that could be managed. Her evasion was

not commented upon. The two sisters-in-law seated themselves side by side in the drawing-room and prepared for that conflict which was renewed as often as they met, and in which the advantage remained sometimes with one side, sometimes with the other. On the present occasion, Lady Brett had more than one weapon ready to her hand, and she picked up the first with manifest satisfaction.

"I am so glad," said she, "that Eustace has made up his mind to send Willie to school. Undoubtedly it is the right thing to do."

"Has anybody suggested that it was the wrong thing to do?" inquired Marcia.

"Oh, that of course I don't know. I was afraid that you might be opposed to it—which we should all have been sorry for. Children, I think, ought not to be looked upon as mere playthings. It is very necessary to remember that in a few years they will be men and women, and that their future must depend to a great extent upon their early training."

"How funny it is," remarked Marcia sweetly, "that the people who have no children of their own always know so very well in what way other people's children ought to be brought up."

A slow flush mounted into Lady Brett's sallow

cheeks. "I do not pretend to be an authority upon such subjects," she returned; "but I have eyes and ears, and I do not require to be a mother in order to understand that the social atmosphere of this house is not the most wholesome in the world for a growing boy."

"You are very flattering, Caroline. I didn't know that this was an immoral household; but since you say so, no doubt it is so; for you are never wrong. I myself have a tolerably clear conscience; but I can't answer for Eustace, because I never question him as to how he spends his time. Of what particular sin do you suspect him?"

"If all men were as good Christians and as good husbands as Eustace," returned the other, who was but an indifferent fencer, "the world would be better and happier than it is. As you know, I said nothing about immorality, nor should I think of using such a word unless I had convincing proof—but no matter! Feeling as I do about the sanctity of the marriage-tie, I must and do feel that it would be a sad pity if Willie were tempted to think lightly of it at an impressionable age—that is all."

Marcia, after the fashion of women, lost her temper at the very moment when she might have routed her adversary by keeping it. "You are

vulgar and insulting, Caroline!" she exclaimed; "it is your nature to be so, I suppose. Yet I should have thought that even you might have had more human feeling than to imagine that any mother would teach such a lesson to her son!"

"Oh, my dear, I am sure you would not teach such a lesson intentionally," Lady Brett replied, delighted at the success of her thrust; "but, fortunately or unfortunately, example is always a more powerful instructor than precept. I should not in the least mind your calling me vulgar if I could open your eyes to what everybody else sees, and what Willie, amongst the rest, cannot help seeing. Flirtation may seem to you an innocent thing—I am willing, for the sake of argument, to admit that it does—but it does not seem so to other people, and when you are perpetually inviting young men, such as Mr. Archdale, for instance, to your house——"

"I have never flirted in any way whatsoever with Mr. Archdale," interrupted Marcia indignantly. "It is your own horrid imagination that always make you suspect evil where none exists. I can't cure you of the disease from which you suffer, and I don't mean to try; but this I can tell you, Caroline; you may spare yourself the trouble of interfering with me, for it isn't the fear

of my being blamed by you that will make me give up any friend of mine!"

Lady Brett closed her eyes, shook her head slowly, and smiled. This was what she usually did when at a loss for a retort, and certainly no retort could have been more effective. By the time that the men came in from the dining-room, the two ladies had exchanged some bitter speeches, and one of them was in a thoroughly reckless temper. Partly upon the principle that one may as well be hanged for a sheep as for a lamb, partly because she wished to scandalize her husband's censorious relatives, and partly because she felt that Archdale was the only individual present from whom she could hope for either kindness or justice, Marcia at once devoted herself to the young artist, whom she led away into a corner, and who was only too glad to be given an opportunity of conversing with her apart.

Nevertheless, he did not, apparently, take much advantage of this privilege, and Lady Brett, if she had heard what he was saying, might possibly have been a little disappointed. His talk was chiefly of the foreign lands in which he had sojourned; he spoke with enthusiasm of Italy, and especially of Venice, which he declared to be the most enchanting spot in the whole world. "That

is, supposing that one can be there with the companion of one's choice. Of course, all places depend more or less upon the company in which one visits them."

"I was there with my husband," remarked Marcia. "He was ill at the time, and it rained every day. I can't say that I have a very pleasant recollection of the place."

"Oh, if it rained and if—well, I dare say Venice wouldn't suit Mr. Brett particularly well."

"No place suits Eustace, except London. And London for him doesn't mean the London that I live in."

"And like?"

"I am not quite sure. Sometimes I think that I like it and sometimes I feel as if I would give anything to get away from it and never see it again. As you say, all depends upon the company that one is in, and though there are plenty of nice people in London, there are a great many horrid ones too."

It was not necessary for her to specify the horrid people. He could guess that some of them were not very far away at that moment, nor was he contradicted when he observed that one's relations, generally speaking, were apt to be horrid. And, if he did not tell her in so many words

that she was the person of all others with whom it would be a delight to him to float across the smooth, sunny lagoons of the Adriatic, she understood well enough what he refrained from saying, and the vision which he conjured up before her mind's eye was not displeasing to her. It was never displeasing to Marcia to be appreciated; perhaps that is never displeasing to anybody.

Eustace Brett was appreciated by his sister-in-law—or, at any rate, she assured him that he was. She said she often felt so very sorry for him. "I know how you must hate the life of perpetual racket which Marcia enjoys, and I know your health is not in a state to stand it. Sometimes I think that you are almost too indulgent a husband, Eustace."

She was a stupid woman and she did not in the least comprehend the character of the man to whom she was speaking. Yet, offensive as any strictures upon his wife were to him and little as he was disposed to encourage them, they influenced him in some degree.

"The perpetual racket does not affect me," he answered coldly; for I take no part in it. It is natural that Marcia, at her age, should find pleasure in amusements which have ceased to give pleasure to a man of mine."

But in his heart he thought, as he had always thought, that a good wife will like what her husband likes, and it vexed him to know that disinterested on-lookers did not consider Marcia's conduct to be that of a good wife.

Lady Brett, in no wise discouraged, continued to condole with him until her carriage was announced, when she woke up Sir George, who had dropped asleep over the *Observer*. It was a mere accident that Marcia, whose back was turned, did not notice the rustle of her sister-in-law's dress and that her husband had to cross the room in order to call her attention to the fact that her guests were waiting to take leave of her; but the effect was to make her appear as though she had forgotten the presence of any guest save Mr. Archdale.

"So sorry to interrupt you, dear," Lady Brett said; "but I won't keep you a moment. Good night."

Then kisses were exchanged, and as Mr. Brett, in his old-fashioned way, offered his arm to Caroline to escort her downstairs, Archdale took occasion to remark smilingly, "I'm afraid your relatives don't think much of me, Mrs. Brett."

"Oh, if you are a friend of mine, that is quite enough to make them hate you," answered Marcia

impatiently. "Perhaps you had better go away now. I am going to be lectured for not having been sufficiently civil to them; though, Heaven knows! I did my best."

CHAPTER VIII.

WILLIE STARTS IN LIFE.

From the evening when he had dined in Cornwall Terrace, Archdale allowed no chance of meeting Mrs. Brett to escape him—which is as much as to say that he met her at least once in every twenty-four hours. He found out what her engagements were by the simple and direct process of asking her; and the rest was easy enough, for he had a large acquaintance. Moreover, he was something of a celebrity, so that there was no great trouble about obtaining invitations from people whom he did not happen to know. Her face, he noticed, always brightened when he approached her; he had had experience enough to recognize and understand certain symptoms which were perceptible in her speech and manner, and he felt pretty sure that he was on the high road towards success. That there was anything dishonourable, ungenerous or unworthy of a gentleman in the kind of success that he coveted never occurred to him for a

moment. He saw no harm in such philandering; he did not believe in anybody's constancy, least of all in his own, and he foresaw without much distress of mind the inevitable day when his dear Mrs. Brett would grow tired of him—always supposing that he did not first tire of her. Meanwhile it was delightful to sit with her on staircases or in secluded recesses, to watch the play of her features and to divine her thoughts.

Probably, if it had been in his power to divine those thoughts accurately, some quarters of an hour of mortification would have fallen to his lot. He would have discovered that Sylvia was greatly taken with him, and liked him better the more she saw of him; but he would likewise have discovered that he did not by any means occupy the first place in her mind or heart at the time. The truth was that while she was listening, with a smile upon her lips, to the pretty things which he knew so well how to whisper, she was more often than not counting the days which still remained to her before the arrival of a date which seemed to bar the perspective of the future as a thundercloud blots out a landscape, and if by taking a final farewell of Mr. Archdale she could have gained the privilege of keeping Willie with her for another six months, Mr. Archdale would doubtless have been

dismissed to form attachments elsewhere without hesitation.

But Fate offers no such bargains to hapless mortals, and in due course the dreaded morning came when Willie's portmanteau was packed and when his mother, issuing from her bedroom (where she always breakfasted), found him waiting for her in the hall with Mr. Brett, who was for once absenting himself from his magisterial duties. Marcia had hoped that he would delegate to her the task of conducting her boy to Farnborough; but he had informed her on the previous evening that he proposed to accompany them. There were one or two points which he had omitted to mention to the head-master on the occasion of his former visit, he said. So there he was, with his hat on his head and his watch in his hand, and although the only words that he uttered were "Good morning," his face added as plainly as possible, "For goodness' sake make haste, and whatever you do, try to exercise a little self-control for the present! Surely it cannot be necessary to begin crying already."

But Marcia could not keep the tears out of her eyes, nor could she trust herself to speak. It was easy enough for Miss Wells to put a brave face upon this parting, she thought, rather unjustly;

what did Miss Wells care? Miss Wells was, no doubt, sorry to lose her pupil, possibly also to lose her situation; but that was a very different thing from the loss—the irreparable loss—which the boy's mother was about to incur. Nobody understood, nobody could understand her misery—unless it might be, in some faint degree, Willie himself.

Whatever may have been the limits of Willie's comprehension, they were probably somewhat wider than his elders imagined them to be, and his mother's character (which so little resembled his own) was in many respects no mystery to him.

On the way to the station he confronted her with reassuring glances and smiles, while Mr. Brett consulted his watch, and fidgeted, and called out to the coachman to drive faster. Some men, it is said, can go under fire for the first time without experiencing any nervous disturbance, whereas most of us feel pretty sure that we should be a good deal frightened under such circumstances, though we may be permitted to hope that we should not disgrace ourselves. The soldier who does not know what fear is, and the boy who on leaving home for his first school is free from an inward sinking of the heart, are perhaps enviable persons; but there seems to be no particular reason why they should be admired. Willie Brett,

in whose small body there was courage enough to meet all emergencies, did not belong to the above exceptional class, so that it was a little hard upon him to have to keep up somebody else's spirits as well as his own. However, he did his best; and if he could not manage to talk quite as much as usual, that was of the less consequence because Marcia was incapable of responding.

The journey could not be anything but a miserable one: happily it did not last very long. Mr. Brett read the papers and cleared his voice from time to time (he had a way of clearing his voice at frequent intervals which always irritated his wife's nerves); Marcia gazed out of the window with sad eyes which saw nothing; and Willie, sitting silent in a corner of the railway carriage, with one leg tucked under him, revolved many thoughts in an active mind. Then came the drive to the school and the reception by the head-master, a brisk, athletic-looking clergyman, whose manners had not the good fortune to please Marcia.

"Oh, we won't eat the young gentleman up, Mrs. Brett," said he, with a good-humoured and compassionate appreciation of the maternal misgivings which his practised eye at once detected; "he'll soon make friends with the boys, and if

he doesn't make friends with us masters it shall not be our fault, I promise you. Would you like to take a look round the playground and the schoolrooms? No? Well, if you want to catch the next up-train, you haven't a great deal of time to spare, I'm afraid. Pocket-money? Well, no; we don't think it desirable to make distinctions between the boys in that matter. We give them sixpence a week each—subject to deductions for misconduct, from which I hope that my friend here won't suffer."

Marcia sighed and replaced her sovereign in her purse, while Mr. Brett remarked gravely, "I think sixpence a week should be ample." He never disputed his wife's right to dispose of her money as she might see fit; but he had a strong opinion that Willie ought not to be brought up as the son of a rich man. He withdrew a few paces in order to inform the schoolmaster of his wishes with regard to certain matters of detail, and so came that dreadful moment of leave-taking which it is cruel to prolong.

Well, there was not much to be said, and the poor little man needed all his fortitude when he felt his mother's warm tears dropping on to his cheeks. She squeezed a small parcel into his hand—it was a miniature of herself which she

had had taken a short time before, and which represented her as the beautiful woman that she was. "Good-bye, my darling!" she whispered; "you won't forget me, will you? I shall always be thinking about you—always! I don't know how I shall live without you; but I don't want you to be miserable; I want you to be happy. And, Willie, if you ever—if you ever—" she had to stop for a moment and choke down her sobs. "If you ever do anything wrong," she resumed presently, "you mustn't be afraid of me, because I'm not good either, and I shall understand—and —and—I love you so!——"

Poor soul! her parting gift and her parting words were characteristic enough. They got her out of the house somehow, and when she regained some command over her senses she was seated in the fly beside the cold, matter-of-fact man whom she had once promised to love, honour, and obey—a ridiculous engagement, surely, to demand from frail human nature.

But Mr. Brett was not quite as unsympathetic as he looked. He certainly thought that his wife had made a rather ridiculous exhibition of herself; but the scene was over now and it had been no worse than he had anticipated, and he was anxious to say something consoling to her if he could.

"You must not take this so much to heart, Marcia," he began; "it is a great deal better for Willie to be with other boys than to be kept at home, you may be sure. It is not as though he were weakly and disinclined to play cricket. If he were, that would be another matter, no doubt."

"Oh, he will be happy after the first day or two," answered Marcia from behind her handkerchief. "It is just because I know that he is going to enjoy himself and have a jolly life that I am so wretched."

Mr. Brett felt constrained to observe, "That is rather a selfish sort of love, isn't it?"

"All love is selfish."

"I think not, Marcia; I hope not. It seems to me, on the contrary, that love, if it be sincere, must of necessity be unselfish. When we really love we forget ourselves and our own wishes——"

Marcia drowned the remainder of his sentence with an impatient laugh, broken by a sob. "One has heard all that!" she cried; "the copy-books informed us of it in our childhood. Why don't you offer me a few more platitudes? 'Be virtuous and you will be happy,' or something of that kind. You can be virtuous without being happy, and, what is more, you can be happy without being virtuous. All the copy-books that were ever com-

piled can't turn the world into a Paradise or do away with facts which stare everybody in the face."

Mr. Brett sighed. "I speak of what I myself experience and have experienced," he said. "I suppose we all judge of others by ourselves, and I doubt whether we make any great mistake in doing so."

"Oh, if we start by knowing something about ourselves—however, I dare say you know a good deal about yourself. Only don't you think you may be making a little mistake in imagining that you ever loved anybody? I don't deny that you are capable of a good, steady, well-regulated affection for those who deserve it; but you couldn't feel much love for a sinner, could you? You would think that quite wrong."

He was hurt and aggrieved; but he made allowance for her. He perceived that she was so sore and so sensitive that, like a wounded animal, she could not help turning upon any one who tried to relieve her sufferings. "Well, well," he said, "we won't dispute about me and my capabilities; I am not very important one way or the other. Still there are many ways of loving, Marcia."

"Oh, what nonsense!" she returned, in the voice of an angry child; "there is one way and

only one. If you don't understand what that is, so much the better for you! Please, leave me alone, Eustace. By-and-by I shall be able to conduct myself like a civilized, heartless being; just now I really am not fit to be spoken to."

Mr. Brett could not dispute the truth of the latter assertion. He held his peace during the remainder of the drive, and did not speak again till two-thirds of the railway journey which followed had been accomplished. Grief is apt to be unreasonable, he thought, the grief of women is especially so; and the more violently it displays itself, the sooner it is over, as a rule. In another twenty-four hours Marcia would doubtless have become accustomed, if not resigned, to her loss; probably in the meanwhile it was best to comply with her entreaty and leave her alone. Nevertheless, when they were nearing London, it occurred to him to say—

"You have not forgotten, I hope, that we are dining with my brother George to-night."

"With whom?" asked Marcia, starting out of her sorrowful musings. "With George and Caroline? Oh, I can't possibly dine *there* this evening —nothing would induce me!"

"Yet you accepted the invitation," observed Mr. Brett, with gathering clouds upon his brow.

"Did I? Well, I'll send an excuse as soon as we get home."

"I cannot sanction your doing that, Marcia. It would be an act of unpardonable rudeness, and I am afraid it would be considered a deliberate act also."

"Oh dear, no!" answered Marcia, speaking from the height of her superior social knowledge; "it is the commonest thing in the world for people to send excuses at the last moment."

"It may be, although I was not aware of it; but I am certain that in this instance it would give offence. And, however indifferent you may be to that, I do not wish to offend my brother. If you had refused the invitation when it came I should have been sorry, but I should not have interfered: as you saw fit to accept it, I must request you to keep your engagement." He added, with the air of overcoming some inward reluctance, "I ask this as a personal favour."

"Really, Eustace, it is impossible," answered Marcia. "It isn't because I dislike them, or because I want to go anywhere else, except to bed; but you don't know what Caroline is. She would say things to me about Willie which would simply drive me mad—I couldn't face her to-night! If you think they will be affronted by being thrown

over, you can go without me and say you left me in bed with a splitting headache—which will be true."

"It will be true, perhaps; but it will not be believed. There is one thing of which I should like to remind you, Marcia, because it will probably strike you as important. My brother George is very rich and he has no children. It is not unnatural to anticipate that he will make our boy his heir, provided that we can manage to keep upon friendly terms with him; but it is perfectly possible that he may decide upon a different arrangement, if we go out of our way to slight him. Now I will leave you to judge whether it is worth your while to have a headache to-night."

The appeal was scarcely skilful, and Mr. Brett, who had just observed that there are many ways of loving, might have known better than to trust to it. Marcia, no doubt, had a passionate love for Willie; but she considered that, what with his father's fortune and her own, his pecuniary interests were pretty safe, and as greed of gain was a weakness from which she herself chanced to be free, she looked upon it as an especially contemptible one.

"Is that why you submit so meekly to be patronized by George and pitied by Caroline?"

she asked disdainfully. "Well, I hope you will be gratified by their leaving their money to you or Willie, and I dare say you will be; because they are much too just and righteous and merciful to hold you responsible for my sins. I can't make my head stop aching to please them or even to please myself: besides which, I doubt very much whether they would love me any better if I allowed them to trample upon me."

"Nobody asked you to do that," returned Mr. Brett, with some little irritation; "you are only being asked to make a small sacrifice, which you wouldn't think twice about if the question were one of your own amusement or advantage."

Marcia merely shrugged her shoulders without replying.

"I am to understand then," said Mr. Brett coldly, "that you absolutely decline to oblige me?"

"I don't think you have given me any sufficient reason for obliging you," answered Marcia. "You can't really suppose that, if George has made his will, he will alter it because I once failed to turn up at dinner when I was expected. And, as I told you before, I am feeling too miserable to tolerate Caroline to-night. If I did go with you, the chances are that I should quarrel with her, and

then you would be sorry that you hadn't left me at home."

This consideration may have had some weight with Mr. Brett. At any rate he did not press his request further, and the colloquy ended then and there. However, on parting with his wife after they had reached home, he felt justified in saying: "I do not often ask a favour of you, Marcia, and I am sure you will be glad to hear that it will be a very long time before I break through my rule again."

CHAPTER IX.

ILL-NATURED MRS. DELAMERE.

"Look down upon us!" ejaculated Sir George Brett, laughing heartily at so preposterous a notion; "it would puzzle her to do that, I think. In order to look down upon people, one must be placed above them, and it is evident that she does not occupy that position with regard to us. Really, my dear Caroline, you are disposed to be rather too hard upon poor little Marcia."

"Why in the world you should always speak of her as if she were a child, George, I cannot imagine," Lady Brett returned. "She is thirty, or very near it, she certainly has not much of the innocence of youth, and never since I have known her has she been little. I did not say that she had any right to look down upon us; but as a matter of fact she does, and she loses no occasion of showing it, and she will probably show it to-night. Not, of course, that that is of any consequence."

If Sir George had believed such a thing to be possible, he would have thought it of very great consequence; but he did not and could not believe anything of the sort. There had been passages of arms between his wife and Eustace's wife; more than once he himself had been drawn into the fray, and he had even been obliged to speak his mind pretty plainly to his brother. These family differences had, however, been less frequent of late, he had no desire that they should be renewed, and, although he considered it likely enough that Marcia's pretty head might have been turned by the attentions paid to her in high quarters, he did not suspect her of the enormity laid to her charge. He therefore contented himself with remarking—

"Marcia's manner is occasionally distant, I have noticed. In all probability, a symptom of shyness rather than of pride."

It was now Lady Brett's turn to laugh, and she did so. She was one of those agreeable people who seldom laugh unless they are angry, and whose laughter is high, dry, and unmirthful. She was explaining to her husband that, whatever might be her sister-in-law's shortcomings, timidity was scarcely to be counted amongst their number, when the first of the guests whom they were about

to receive at dinner was announced, and interrupted her.

Sir George and Lady Brett's dinner-parties were done on a very large scale. There was a superabundance of food, a superabundance of people to devour it, and one might have said that there was a superabundance of servants, only that, perhaps, is not possible. With regard to the composition of these assemblages very little trouble was taken. So long as Lady Brett did not bring two deadly enemies together (and even this occurred from time to time through inadvertence), she conceived that she had fulfilled the whole duty of a hostess, and, when she saw four-and-twenty gloomy countenances congregated round her board, she did not feel that she was in any way responsible for their gloom. The countenance of Mr. Brett, who arrived early, was gloomier than usual, and this his sister-in-law at once noticed. She greeted him with her accustomed air of compassion, pressing his hand and saying—

"My dear Eustace, how ill you are looking! What have you done with Marcia? Was she such a long time arranging her dress before the glass that you came upstairs without her?"

"I am quite well, thank you," answered Mr. Brett, with a touch of fretfulness (for there was

nothing that he hated so much as to be told that he was looking ill); "but Marcia, I am sorry to say, is not. She has gone to bed with a very bad headache, and I must beg you to accept her sincere apologies."

There was not much chance that she would either accept them, or place faith in their sincerity. Of this he was fully aware, and he was ready to submit patiently to any censure that might be passed upon the defaulter; but it seemed a little hard that he should be punished for what was assuredly no sin of his.

"Oh, a headache?" said Lady Brett, with a repetition of her wrathful laugh. "Dear me! Well, I am sorry you thought it necessary to come without her, Eustace; a note would have done quite well. And now, you see, we shall be an uneven number."

"Shall I go away again?" asked Mr. Brett.

"Oh, of course not; I didn't mean that. But it is rather tiresome; because I shall have to re-arrange everything now." And, seeing her husband at her elbow, she derived some consolation from saying to him, with a meaning smile, "Marcia is not going to honour us with her company to-night. She has—ahem!—a bad headache."

"Oh, indeed!" answered Sir George. "I am sorry to hear that."

Sir George had bushy grey eyebrows which, when he was displeased, met above his snub nose and gave the upper part of his face an appearance of truculence which was somewhat ludicrously contradicted by the insignificance of his mouth and chin. He had, however, a long upper lip; so that a physiognomist might have guessed the man to be vindictive and obstinate, notwithstanding—or possibly on account of—the weakness of his character. His brother, who understood him, knew that he never forgave an affront, and was not surprised to hear him say—

"Dinner engagements sometimes bring on a headache, I believe. We must endeavour to do what in us lies to prevent the recurrence of such attacks in Marcia's case."

Obviously the matter could not be allowed to rest there; so Mr. Brett drew his brother aside for a moment, and began—

"I very much regret that Marcia has been compelled to disappoint you——"

"Oh, not at all!—no disappointment at all, I assure you," interrupted Sir George. "Marcia has only to please herself and she will please us; pray tell her so from me. Humble as we

are, we have no desire to entertain reluctant guests."

Poor Mr. Brett sighed irritably. "I cannot tell you whether Marcia is or is not reluctant to be your guest, George," said he; "her tastes and mine differ, and we do not often communicate them to each other. But, to the best of my belief, her headache is quite genuine, and I can honestly say that I do not think she is in a fit state to dine out. She has been very much upset by parting with our boy, whom we left at school to-day."

Sir George looked slightly mollified; but perhaps he deemed it beneath his dignity to come out of the sulks without more ado; for he only observed, "It is a wise rule to keep appointments, even at the cost of some personal inconvenience. If I had not adhered to that rule through life, I suppose I should have been in the Bankruptcy Court before now."

The younger brother fell back, feeling that there was no more to be said. His anticipations had been fully verified; George had taken offence, and what made this additionally vexatious was that, by his way of thinking, George had some right to take offence. It was quite true that appointments ought to be kept, and it was probably also true that Marcia might have kept hers by making

a small effort. But Marcia did not choose to make efforts in the required direction, and his own were obviously useless. He wished with all his heart that he had stayed at home, instead of coming in vain to this dismal banquet.

Presently the door was flung open, there was a little stir among the company, and he was introduced to a Mrs. Delamere, a thin, faded woman, whose dress was cut very low, whose cheeks were painted, and whose yellow hair, or wig, was besprinkled with diamonds. He bowed and offered her his arm mechanically. It was a matter of perfect indifference to him whether the person beside whom he was doomed to sit through two weary hours was young or old, fat or thin, coloured or plain. He thought of a few commonplaces to utter for her benefit, and scarcely listened to her replies. After they had taken their seats at the dinner-table she began to talk about the pictures in the Academy, which seemed to show a lamentable lack of original ideas on the part of so smart-looking a lady; but possibly she had her reasons for bringing forward that threadbare topic, and Mr. Brett pricked up his ears when he heard her mention the name of Archdale.

"I like Mr. Archdale's pictures," Mrs. Delamere was saying, "but—perhaps I had better not go

on, though. He is a great friend of yours, isn't he?"

"No; only a slight acquaintance," answered Mr. Brett, turning his tired eyes interrogatively towards his neighbour.

"Oh, not a great friend of yours? I thought perhaps he might be, as he is such a very great friend of your wife's. Though, to be sure, that isn't always a reason, is it?"

"You may safely abuse him, if that is what you wish to do," replied Mr. Brett; for, notwithstanding his coldness and insensibility, he thought, as most men do, that women have no business to be impertinent unless they are pretty.

Mrs. Delamere was not disconcerted. "I wasn't going to abuse him," said she, "but I confess that I don't particularly like him. He is rather too much of a professional lady-killer for my taste."

"Oh, he is a professional lady-killer, is he?" asked Mr. Brett absently.

"Your acquaintance with him must indeed be slight if you haven't discovered that yet. Why, it is the man's sole *raison d'être*—socially speaking, I mean. I don't quarrel with him for flirting, because of course he is good-looking, and perhaps he can't very well help himself, but he shouldn't

parade his conquests as he does. It is hardly fair play, you know."

Eustace Brett might look dull, and it was not surprising that he should look dull, seeing that he generally felt so, but he had wit enough to understand the insinuation and dignity enough to resent it. He said, "I was not aware that Mr. Archdale paraded his conquests; but, if he does, you are, no doubt, quite right in disapproving of his bad taste. Personally, I do not feel sufficient interest in him to care very much whether his taste is good or bad."

"Although he is such a great friend of your wife's?" asked the irrepressible Mrs. Delamere.

"With regard to questions of taste, my wife is at least as good a judge as I. If, therefore, Mr. Archdale is a great friend of hers—but I am not convinced that he is—that would, to my mind, be presumptive evidence in his favour. I should imagine that you have been misinformed about him, but really it does not signify."

Not without a certain effort did Mr. Brett thus snub a willing witness. Clearly Marcia had been guilty of some indiscretion which this woman knew all about and was eager to communicate to him, but he could not receive such testimony. He looked her straight in the face, and she returned

his gaze steadily, dropping the corners of her mouth with an air of mocking commiseration. But she was cowed. He had at least the poor satisfaction of knowing that, whatever calumnies might be upon the tip of her tongue, she had not the courage to let them pass her lips in his presence. She did not trouble him with much more of her conversation after this, and, as the lady who was placed upon his left hand took no notice of him, he sat mute, thinking his own thoughts and wishing for the end of the outrageously long *menu*.

To those who have allowed their minds to dwell upon the idea of eternity it must always be a consolatory reflection that in this world, at any rate, all things are finite, and even Sir George Brett's dinners, like the east winds of spring and the sermons of certain ecclesiastics, moved towards an appointed end, though of course it was not easy to realize this so long as they were in full swing. At a quarter to eleven the ladies left the dining-room, and then Sir George, who had apparently recovered his good humour, was kind enough to address some amiable remarks to his brother.

"So you've got rid of that young scapegrace of yours, eh? A very good thing, too! He'll have

some chance to show what stuff he is made of now. I'm sure I hope he will turn out well, for it looks as though he would be the only one of his generation to bear our name."

There was a significance about this observation which may not have been wholly unintentional, but it scarcely affected Mr. Brett, whose mind was otherwise engaged. He was himself so honest, so upright, so strictly true to his narrow code of morality, that he could not suspect his wife of disloyalty without a sense of personal humiliation. He did not, in truth, suspect her of anything worse than folly; but it was not very pleasant to him to suspect Marcia even of that, and it was very far from pleasant to him, when he went up to the drawing-room, to see Caroline rise, with an air of joyous alacrity, from the sofa upon which she had been sitting beside Mrs. Delamere and make straight for him. For he at once perceived that he was about to be informed of something that he would rather not hear.

Lady Brett, as her habit was, wasted no time in circumlocution, but drew him aside and said bluntly—

"Eustace, I want to speak to you about Marcia. You know me well enough to know that I am not malicious, and that her having treated me so

unceremoniously as she has done to-night and on former occasions would never make me wish to do her an injury. But, for her own sake, to say nothing of yours, I feel I ought to tell you that she is being talked about in a way which should not be allowed to go on. You don't go out, so you cannot see or hear what takes place in society; but it seems to be notorious that that man Archdale is always at her elbow, and that he makes a boast of —well, I am afraid I must call it her infatuation for him. You know—or perhaps you don't know—that there was a fancy fair at the Albert Hall this afternoon, which was patronized by all the great ladies. For some reason or other, Mr. Archdale is also patronized by the great ladies just now, and I am told that at one of their stalls he was selling some water-colours and sketches of his, amongst which was a portrait of your wife, inscribed 'Marcia.' Everybody who knew her recognized it at a glance, and naturally everybody wondered what business he had to make use of her Christian name."

"If he did that," answered Mr. Brett slowly, "he was very impertinent. I have, however, no grounds for supposing that his impertinence was sanctioned by my wife. Mrs. Delamere is your informant, I presume."

"It was from Mrs. Delamere that I heard about the sketch; others have told me that Marcia and Mr. Archdale are inseparable. Personally, I have no ambition to force my way into aristocratic houses; I do not belong to the aristocracy by birth, and I am contented with the position which it has pleased Providence to assign to me. Therefore I am obliged to judge of Marcia's conduct by hearsay."

"Quite so," agreed Mr. Brett, with some slight asperity; "and, if you are obliged to judge of it at all, Mrs. Delamere's authority may, for anything that I know to the contrary, be an excellent one for you to base your judgment upon. For my own part, I should hesitate to rely implicitly upon it, because Mrs. Delamere struck me as ill-natured, and I dare say she may once have been pretty.

Lady Brett frowned and tossed up her chin. "Oh, my dear Eustace," she said, "that accusation of jealousy is such a very stale one to bring against women, and yet every man who makes it appears to think that it is a brand-new discovery of his own! In reality, Mrs. Delamere spoke quite kindly of Marcia. She blamed Mr. Archdale, and I think she was right, and so, I am sure, do you. You cannot think it desirable that gossip should connect your wife's name with his, and I hope and

believe that you will take steps to put an end to such gossip. Mind, I am not interfering or advising—I never do interfere with anybody, as you know—I am merely giving you a caution. Conscientiously, I could do no less."

"I am very much indebted to you," answered Mr. Brett gravely.

Without any irony or figure of speech, he did feel indebted to her, though he considered that he was in duty bound to repress her. She was not the most amiable woman in the world, but he believed her to be honest, pious, and animated by the best intentions. On his way home he had to ask himself what his own intentions were, and the question was a hard one to answer. He was too proud to relish the part of a suspicious husband, too nervous and irritable to despise scandalous whisperings, and too scrupulously honest to blink at the fact that, if his wife was criticised after a fashion which was hateful to him, the fault was in a great measure his own. He had no right to scold her, nor any wish to accuse her; at the bottom of his heart, what he desired was to say nothing to her about Archdale or about that unauthorized exhibition of her portrait. And eventually—as was perhaps rendered inevitable by the conditions of the case—this was the course which he decided to adopt.

He would not retail gossip, he would not provoke a scene, he would not forbid Marcia to speak to Archdale; but in future he would go out with her more frequently than he had hitherto done, and the evidence of his own senses would tell him what step, if any, he ought to take.

It would have been simpler and wiser to tell her frankly what he had heard, and to remind her that public opinion, whether just or unjust, cannot safely be disregarded; but poor Eustace Brett was neither simple nor wise. Had he been the one or the other, he probably would not, on reaching his study, have sunk into an armchair, and, dropping his head upon his hands, have muttered despairingly, "I am sick and weary of it all! I wish to Heaven I had died when I seemed to be so near death!"

CHAPTER X.

MR. BRETT IS VERY UNWISE.

If we all agreed to make no secret of our mental and physical sufferings, the world might perhaps be a more interesting place to live in than it is, but it would probably be a good deal less comfortable. In every civilized community, and even in some uncivilized ones, it is held, not without reason, that pain ought to be submitted to silently, and that to moan and groan in public is both cowardly and ill-bred. Marcia Brett could scarcely be called well-bred in the strict sense of the term, for she had not the most remote idea of who her great-grandfather had been; but she had learnt to conform to the usages of the society which she frequented, and after Willie had been taken from her she went about the world, like most other people, with a smile upon her lips, and ready phrases at the tip of her tongue, and a dull ache about the region of the heart which never wholly ceased, though it was more acute at some moments than at others.

It was no comfort to her (though doubtless it should have been) to receive the boy's cheerful letters, and to hear that he was well and happy. His health had always been good, and he was such a friendly and plucky little fellow that there was small danger of his failing to hit it off with other mortals either at school or elsewhere. The sad thing was that his childhood was at an end, and that never again through time and eternity could his mother be to him what she had once been.

During these melancholy weeks, Marcia found her chief consolation in the company of Mr. Archdale, whom she frequently met, and whose attentions caused her a pleasurable excitement, the causes of which she did not care to analyze. She heard (though not from her husband) the story of his having hawked about a likeness of her at the Albert Hall, and her first feeling was certainly one of annoyance that he should have taken so great a liberty; but his reply, when charged with this offence, was of a nature to disarm hostility.

"Do you mind?" he asked wonderingly. "I had no idea that you would, or, of course, I wouldn't have done it. Perhaps I am wrong, but it always seems to me that a beautiful face is in a certain sense public property—in the same sense, I mean, as places like Chatsworth and Eaton and

Alnwick. The owners of those places have a perfect right to close them against everybody except their friends, but it would be rather churlish of them if they did, don't you think so?"

"The public is very welcome to gaze upon my features, or upon a reproduction of them," answered Marcia, laughing and colouring a little; "I didn't so much object to that as to your using my Christian name as a label. At least, that was what my husband objected to."

"Oh, it was your husband who objected! But he is rather given to objecting, isn't he? Still, I dare say I ought not to have done it. My only excuse is that I honestly thought you would prefer a sort of anonymity to being boldly advertised as 'Mrs. Brett.'"

"Perhaps I might have preferred to avoid advertisement of any kind," observed Marcia, with a smile. "Don't you think you might have just ascertained my wishes before you took upon yourself to advertise me?"

Archdale sighed. "The world has corrupted me," he answered; "it isn't easy for me to realize that a beautiful woman may really dislike notoriety. Well, now I suppose I have only made my case worse. What can I say? I am very, very sorry, Mrs. Brett, and please will you forgive me?"

He assumed an attitude of humility, pressed the tips of his fingers together, and gazed pleadingly into her eyes. Perhaps it was because he looked so handsome and so penitent, perhaps it was because he had twice called her beautiful within the space of a few minutes, that Marcia readily pardoned him.

"Only don't do it again," she said, "because I don't very much like it; and, although Eustace hasn't spoken directly to me upon the subject, I know by his manner that he dislikes it very particularly."

Now there was no denying that Mr. Brett was entitled to dislike it. That much Marcia inwardly acknowledged, nor was she ungrateful to him for the reticence which he had displayed; but what first surprised and then angered her was his novel and persistent determination to force upon her an escort with which she had learned to dispense.

"You have often told me that I ought to go out more with you," he answered dryly, when she remonstrated with him for over-tiring himself by attending three balls in one night. "I begin to see that you are right, and I shall try to do my duty, so long as my strength will serve me."

"I am sorry that you should feel bound to make

a martyr of yourself," returned Marcia, vexed by the tacit reproach.

She really could not give up all social intercourse to please him. Once upon a time she might perhaps have been persuaded to make that sacrifice, but it was far too late now. Long ago it had been agreed between them that they should go their respective ways, each without let or hindrance from the other, and she, for her part, did not desire to cancel the agreement. If, for some reason best known to himself, he intended to make a change in his habits, that was his affair.

And naturally it did not take her very long to discover what his reason was. Often, while she was chatting with Archdale, and while her spirits (which fell every morning when, through mere force of habit, she peeped into Willie's empty room) were beginning to rise again, she had a disagreeable sensation of being watched by somebody, and, sure enough, she would presently descry at a distance of some few yards a pair of faded, tired eyes fixed upon her—eyes which expressed neither blame nor remonstrance nor wrath, but merely a sort of dull patience. It was anything but a patient look that flashed from her own as she met them. What did he mean? What did he suspect? What did he want? Jealousy she could have

forgiven, but this was not jealousy, it was sheer *espionage.*

In truth, poor Mr. Brett could hardly have adopted a more foolish line of conduct than that which had recommended itself to him. He was no spy : yet he managed to look exactly like one, and if his motive for hovering near his wife was to stop the mouths of the scandal-mongers, not to interfere with her liberty of action, so much chivalry was scarcely to be inferred from his demeanour. In reality he was not dissatisfied with what he saw. He had no fancy for Archdale and wondered at her taste in making a friend of the man ; but she did not, so far as he was able to judge, favour Archdale more than she had favoured a dozen others. At the bottom of his heart there lurked a conviction, which he had always evaded putting into the form of a distinct thought, that Marcia loved herself too much to be capable of loving any other human being too much.

But Marcia, pardonably enough, failed to discern all this. What was quite evident was that Eustace had resolved to dog her steps, and the futility of the proceeding was scarcely less exasperating to her than its impertinence. For how in the world is a Metropolitan Police-magistrate to discharge his daily duties and undertake those of an amateur

detective into the bargain? His absurd conduct invited and almost defied her to outwit him. But for that imaginary defiance, she would not, perhaps, have made so many appointments to meet Archdale in the Park, at Hurlingham, at luncheon-parties and tea-parties. So they met continually, and of course their intimacy was remarked upon, and at length Lady Wetherby availed herself of the privilege of an old friend to say—

"Aren't you a little imprudent, Marcia? Mr. Archdale is a clever artist, and I dare say he may be very pleasant company; but he isn't worth getting into trouble about, and you know as well as I do that a woman always gets into trouble when her neighbours begin to accuse her of finding some man's company more pleasant than she ought."

"Oh, I am sick of being prudent!" answered Marcia impatiently. "What difference does it make? Spiteful people will always find an excuse for being spiteful, and, so long as one does nothing wrong, why should one bother one's head about them?"

Lady Wetherby made a faint dissentient murmur. She would have liked to ask what her friend's definition of "doing nothing wrong" was, but was too sensible to put so useless a question. However, there seemed to be no harm in remarking

that some women were so situated as to be more open than others to the attacks of spite, and in deploring Mr. Brett's stay-at-home habits.

"But he doesn't stay at home any longer now," returned Marcia, with a short laugh; "he has taken to pursuing me like my shadow of late, and no entertainment is complete without him. You may imagine how he enjoys it!"

This was not very satisfactory hearing to one who wished Marcia well, and Lady Wetherby was glad to think that the London season was within a few weeks of its close. Her kindness of heart prompted her to say, upon the spur of the moment, "I wish you would come down to Wetherby with us when we go, Marcia. It will be dull, of course, because we are to have no visitors at first, I believe; but the rest will be good for you after such a long course of gaiety, and, if you don't get tired of us, we shall keep you until Mr. Brett takes his holiday."

"I never get tired of you, Laura," answered Marcia; "you and Willie are the only two people in the world who don't weary me." She paused for a moment and sighed slightly before she added, "Yes; I think I should like to go to Wetherby with you. When is the move to be made?"

"In about ten days, I hope. We have had

quite enough of London for this summer, and so, I should think, have you."

Marcia nodded and sighed once more. For the moment she did feel that it would be a relief to escape from the turmoil of London to the green lawns and leafy glades of Wetherby. She felt, too, that Laura was right in accusing her of imprudence; and although she had fully intended to be imprudent, she did not quite like to hear how successfully her intentions had been carried out. It was all very well to protest indifference to the opinion of spiteful persons, but her nature would not really allow her to be indifferent to anybody's opinion, and, if Mr. Archdale was not worth getting into trouble about, assuredly Eustace was not. It would be the height of folly to place in jeopardy the position which she had laboriously held during so many years for the sake of punishing one man who was incapable of loving her and giving some temporary gratification to another, who would probably forget her existence before she had been a week out of his sight.

But when all was arranged, and when Mr. Brett had signified his cordial approval of the proposed plan, she began to wish that she had not been in such a hurry. Had she so many friends that she must needs deprive herself of the one who was

most congenial to her? And was there any reasonable likelihood of Mr. Archdale's possessing a heart of the kind which absence causes to grow fonder? It was not without some nervousness and hesitation that she informed him of her impending departure; for she was sure that he would be greatly distressed, and she dreaded the questions which he might be expected to ask upon the subject. He surprised her by receiving the news quite composedly.

"So you are going to Wetherby?" he said. "That's capital! I'm going there too."

"But not just yet, are you?" asked Marcia. "Laura said nothing about it. In fact I understood that there was to be nobody but themselves in the house."

"Well, I'm nobody; I'm only the artist who comes to paint the walls. When Lord Wetherby gave me the order he said I might choose my own time for executing it, and now I shall avail myself of that gracious permission."

Marcia gave him several good reasons for waiting until he was asked. It was absurd to speak of himself as though he were a mere house-decorator; when he visited Wetherby he must of course do so as a guest; both Laura and Lord Wetherby were anxious, she believed, to lead a life

of absolute retirement for a few weeks; he would find the place much more enjoyable later in the year, when the shooting-parties would have begun. "Besides," she added at length, perceiving that none of these arguments moved him, "they will certainly think that you wish to go there now because I am going."

"Naturally they will," he replied calmly; "that's just what I shall tell them."

Marcia could not help laughing. "Perhaps it will be just as well if you do," she said; "for then they will undoubtedly request you to postpone your visit."

"Do you mean that you would prefer my room to my company?" he asked quickly. "In that case, I need hardly say that I won't attempt to force myself upon you."

She shrugged her shoulders slightly. "I think you know what I mean," she answered. "It will be rather dull at Wetherby, but sometimes dulness has to be endured."

"Only when it is unavoidable, though. I am quite sure that I shall not be able to endure the dulness of London after you have left, so, with your permission, I shall throw myself upon the good nature and hospitality of the Wetherbys. I don't a bit mind their knowing that your presence

in the house will be a powerful attraction to me: why shouldn't it be?"

Marcia neither gave her permission nor refused it. She could not very well be more explicit than she had been, and she said to herself that, if he was bent upon courting a rebuff, he must be allowed to do so. Since there was not the smallest chance of his obtaining the invitation of which he made so sure, she felt at liberty to regret that inability and to rejoice a little on his admission that he would find London unbearably dull without her.

But it was with no apprehension of being rebuffed that Archdale went to call upon Lady Wetherby on the following day. Experience, by the light of which we are all wont to steer (and a poor sort of light it is, though perhaps the best obtainable), had long ago taught him that he could get almost anything that he wanted by asking for it prettily, and, although he was not very warmly received, it was with all his usual self-confidence and cheerfulness that he began—

"So you're off to the country, I hear, Lady Wetherby. I'm very glad of it, because I want to get away from London too, and I don't think there could be a better time for me to make a start with the famous panels. Could you put me up if I ran down in about a week or ten days?"

"Oh, there is no hurry about the panels," answered Lady Wetherby in a tone which was not meant to be encouraging.

"Ah, I'm afraid there's never any hurry where my work is concerned. I'm diligent, but I'm incurably slow, and I really ought not to put off the beginning of this job any longer. Moreover, Mrs. Brett tells me that she is to be your only guest for some weeks to come, so that if I go down now I shall not be in the people's way and there will be nobody to interrupt me."

"You think there would be no interruptions?"

Archdale laughed. "None of a deleterious kind," he answered. "Mrs. Brett won't be an interruption, you know, she'll be an inspiration."

"I don't think there is any occasion for us to take you away from London before the end of the season," said Lady Wetherby coldly.

"But when I tell you that I am dying to leave London! Now, I know quite well what you are thinking, and you are both right and wrong. You are right about my wishing to be in the same house with Mrs. Brett, whom I still adore in my innocent way, but you are quite wrong in setting me down as dangerous. Really and truly I am not dangerous."

Lady Wetherby tried for a moment to maintain

a dignified demeanour, but could not manage it. "If you care to know what I think," said she, "I think you a good deal more conceited than dangerous; but that may not be generally understood, and I suppose you must be aware that there has been a certain amount of gossip about Marcia and you lately. Therefore, if it is the same thing to you, I would rather ask you to come to us in August or September than now."

"But it isn't at all the same thing to me," returned the irrepressible Archdale. "How very unkind you are! Mayn't I come if I promise and swear to behave with the utmost propriety?"

This sort of pleading, which he had found effective in other quarters, was not quite the best that he could have adopted in his present difficulty, and he would no doubt have promised and sworn in vain if Lord Wetherby had not chanced to enter the room before he left it. To that good-natured and easy-going personage he at once appealed.

"I say, Lord Wetherby, I want to go down to your place in a week, and set to work, and Lady Wetherby won't have me, because she is afraid I shall flirt with Mrs. Brett. Did you ever hear of anything more unfounded and ridiculous! Why, I shall be daubing away at the walls pretty nearly all day long!"

"My good fellow," answered Lord Wetherby, "if you aren't afraid of Mrs. Brett, I don't think we need be alarmed on her account. Mrs. Brett can take pretty good care of herself. By all means, come whenever it suits you; only don't blame me if you get a broken heart for your pains."

Archdale seized his advantage with commendable promptitude. "Thanks awfully," said he, "that's all right, then. I'll make my preparations, and drop you a line as soon as I'm ready to begin. Good-bye." And he was out of the house before another word could be uttered.

Lady Wetherby had an admirable temper, but this was more than she could stand. "Everybody knows," she told her husband, "that you have no discrimination, but I really do think that, for my sake if for no one else's, you might have snubbed that man. How he can have the impudence to accept an invitation which I had just refused point-blank to give him, passes my comprehension!"

"He *is* a little bit cheeky, perhaps," agreed Lord Wetherby, with a meditative smile.

"Cheek is no word for it! Well, since you have asked him, I suppose he must come; but I warn you, that I shall turn him out of the house without ceremony if he doesn't behave himself. I only hope and trust that people won't hear what an idiotic thing we have done."

CHAPTER XI.

AT WETHERBY.

Wetherby is one of those vast, solid, north-country mansions which excite admiration rather than a spirit of covetousness in the breast of the beholder. Standing upon high ground, this huge, weather-worn pile of grey stone commands from its many windows a wide view over the counties of Yorkshire and Durham, upon the borders of which it is situated, and presents a sufficiently imposing appearance by reason of its size, though its architectural merits are scarcely of the first order. When the wind blows from the north-east (a happy condition of things which commonly prevails throughout the autumn, winter, and spring), it is cold beyond all power of words to describe, or of any furnace to overcome; it is lonely because the extent of its owner's territory converts near neighbours into distant ones, and it is dreary apart from climatic disadvantages, because no house-party large enough to fill it

can possibly be assembled within its walls. Nevertheless, this bleak domain is not always bleak. In hot summers (for even Durham and Yorkshire have a summer, and even England, as we know, can boast of a hot one every now and again) the whispering woods and grassy glades of Wetherby afford a retreat which to many a weary Londoner would seem like Paradise, nor was their beauty thrown away upon Marcia Brett, who sometimes fancied that she enjoyed solitude and communion with Nature. If this was quite a mistake—as in all probability it was—sufficient time to discover her error was not granted to her; for she had not tasted the delights of sylvan existence for three days, when her hostess remarked casually:—

"Mr. Archdale is to arrive this evening. I forget whether I told you that he is to paint the panels of the ball-room for us. It will be a long job, and it will keep him busy all day long; so I dare say he will not be much in our way."

Marcia both felt and looked astonished; but Lady Wetherby did not choose to notice that. "He asked himself," she explained. "Artists, I suppose, must be allowed such privileges, though they are sometimes a little inconvenient. One comfort is, that I don't feel called upon to provide entertainment for him."

An irrepressible smile appeared for a moment upon Marcia's lips: she may have thought that the task of entertaining Mr. Archdale might safely be committed to her. But this, it needs scarcely be said, was by no means Lady Wetherby's view of the case; nor was the young artist, who duly appeared at the dinner-table that night, suffered to forget that he had joined the party in a purely professional capacity. He could not, of course, be prevented from spending a part of the evening with the ladies; but he could be, and was, prevented from spending a single minute with one of them alone. And, on the following morning, he was informed, in the most considerate way, that nobody would think of interrupting him at his labours. If he preferred to have his luncheon brought to him in the ball-room, he was to ring the bell and say so; he was to make himself quite at home, and to order anything that he wanted, including a horse, when he felt the need of exercise and fresh air.

"In short," said Lady Wetherby graciously, "we shall go on just as if you were not here, and you must not trouble your head about any of us."

Archdale did not allow diffidence to deter him from suggesting that Mrs. Brett might like to explore the neighbourhood on horseback, and

adding that he should be most happy to escort her; but, unfortunately for him, Marcia did not ride, and all his ingenuity was employed in vain to defeat the vigilance of her too devoted friend. It was useless to bounce into the library or the boudoir at unexpected times; nothing was gained by patiently promenading the garden before breakfast, nor did it avail him to request Mrs. Brett's honest opinion of his work, so far as it had gone. Mrs. Brett was quite willing to pass judgment upon his outlines, but so also was Lady Wetherby; they appeared to be absolutely inseparable, and the most provoking part of the whole business was that Marcia evidently enjoyed this very poor and unduly protracted joke.

Such jokes are always enjoyed by women, and Marcia was not yet weary of this one at the end of the week, by which time Archdale's exasperation could no longer be concealed. Knowing, as she did, that neither Lady Wetherby nor anybody else could prevent her from granting the interview that he desired, so soon as it should please her to be merciful, she naturally chose to prolong a state of things which it was at her option to terminate. It was, however, terminated at length by circumstances with which she had nothing to do. A political meeting having been appointed to take

place in one of the large neighbouring towns, and sundry statesmen having intimated their intention of speaking at it, Lord Wetherby could do no less than offer hospitality to the orators and their families; and, so it came to pass, that an assembly of some twenty persons claimed his wife's attention one evening. Poor Lady Wetherby knew very well what was sure to happen; but how could she help it? She kept Marcia beside her after dinner, and engaged her in conversation with the political ladies; but, of course, the groups broke up when the men came in from the dining-room, and, equally of course, Archdale succeeded in drawing Mrs. Brett away to an open window, whence a charming prospect of moon-lit lawn and garden could be descried.

"Don't you think it would be rather nice to go outside for a few minutes?" he asked humbly. "This room is stiflingly hot, and, though I suppose these people are too old and solemn to perpetrate a round game, one of them is sure to be asked to sing presently, which will be almost as bad."

Marcia, who was not looking at him and seemed to be pre-occupied with thoughts of her own, nodded and stepped out on to the grass without more ado. Twenty-four hours earlier she would perhaps have shown herself less accommodating,

but it so chanced that she had received that morning a letter from her husband which had not only annoyed her a good deal, but had produced upon her exactly the opposite effect to that which it had been intended to produce; this, unluckily, was the usual fate of Mr. Brett's letters to his wife.

"I have been sorry," he wrote, "to hear that Mr. Archdale is staying in the house with you, and I confess that, if I had known he would be there, I should have hesitated to let you accept Lady Wetherby's invitation. You will understand that I mean nothing more than I say; only I think it right to tell you—in case you do not already know it—that the coincidence of your leaving London simultaneously and meeting in Yorkshire will be commented upon. Under the circumstances, I think it well that you should join me as soon as possible, and I have arranged to move down to Lynton, where I have secured a house for the summer months, somewhat earlier than I had intended. I have sent some of the servants to make preparations. Willie's holidays, as you know, will begin in about a fortnight's time, so that you will have a more powerful motive for coming south than any mere wish of mine could supply. I should, however, much prefer your quitting your present quarters early next week."

Marcia thought this missive ungenerous, unmanly and ungentlemanlike, and she mentally applied all these epithets, besides some stronger ones, to it. It was, at any rate, unwise and unprofitable; for after she had perused it she resolved that nothing should induce her to leave Wetherby a day sooner than she had originally proposed; furthermore, she determined that she would no longer deny herself the pleasure of talking to Mr. Archdale when she felt so inclined. What had she done to be treated with such distrust? Certainly, if she had been minded to forget her duty, it would not have been Lady Wetherby's precautions or Eustace's suspicions that would have roused her to a keener sense of it. So she had not a word to say against Archdale's proposal that they should stroll across the garden towards the shrubberies which adjoined Lord Wetherby's famous coverts, nor did she resent the reproachful accents in which he inquired why he had been sent to Coventry for a week.

"I haven't sent you to Coventry," she answered; "but I don't wish Laura to think that I asked you to come here, and she evidently does think that you are only here because I am. I warned you in London, you know, that she would."

"Yes; and I told you that I hadn't the slightest

objection to her being aware of the truth. Have you any objection?"

Marcia shrugged her shoulders. "I have a strong objection to being worried," she replied, "and of late everybody seems to have entered into a conspiracy to worry me. The worst of them all is my husband, because he doesn't really care in the least what I do or who my friends may be."

"Does Mr. Brett consider me an undesirable friend for you?" Archdale inquired.

"Oh, I suppose so, or else he considers it undesirable in the abstract that I should have any friends at all, except women. But, as I told you, he doesn't really care one way or the other. This morning I had orders from him to proceed as soon as possible to Devonshire, where we are to spend the summer—and what an enjoyable summer it will be! He has taken a house at Lynton—have you ever been there?"

Archdale had not visited that picturesque neighbourhood, but had long desired to make himself acquainted with it, and hoped ere long to carry his wish into effect.

"Only not this year, please," said Marcia, laughing. "I should be delighted to see you, but I'm afraid Eustace would not; and, as I don't know a single soul in those parts, it is very

essential to my comfort that Eustace should be kept in a moderately good humour."

Her companion made no immediate rejoinder; he was walking beside her with his hands in his pockets and his eyes bent upon the ground. "I don't know," he began at length, "whether I am going to say anything shockingly immoral, but it does seem to me a great pity that marriages can't be dissolved by mutual consent. Why should one be made to suffer all one's life long because one has fallen into a little mistake in one's youth?"

There are obvious reasons for the existence of such a state of things, and Marcia recognized them. She did not, however, think it necessary to state these for Mr. Archdale's benefit, but merely observed, "Little mistakes lead to great disasters; it's the way of the world, and there's no help for it. Still, I sometimes think it is rather hard that experience should be such a useless thing. If one could begin all over again, one would know better and act differently; but one can't begin again."

"No," agreed Archdale, sighing; "one can't undo what is done: but one is surely entitled to get such happiness out of life as remains possible. Every man and every woman has a moral right, for instance, to the choice of friends."

"Very likely; but claiming a right isn't always the way to ensure happiness, I'm afraid."

They continue to beat about the bush after this fashion for some little time longer. Neither of them perhaps quite entered into the sentiments of the other, yet there was a mutual understanding between them which was probably sufficient for immediate purposes. Marcia did not care to disguise the fact that she had no love for her husband, while Archdale was extremely anxious to make it clear that, if he himself were in that fortunate man's place, no wish of hers would remain ungratified. His manner was more subdued and more respectful than usual; he said very little which might not have been said in the presence of Lady Wetherby, and Marcia, who was conscious of having allowed her tongue far too much liberty, could not but feel grateful to him for his moderation. Also it must be confessed that his companionship and his sympathy, which was insinuated rather than spoken, were delightful to her.

Delightful, too, were the stillness and fragrance of the summer night and the moonlit vistas of the woods, which they had now entered. It was not surprising that amid such surroundings and in the interchange of half-confidences, they should

have lost count of time; still less surprising, perhaps, was it that they should have lost an even more important thing, namely, all accurate knowledge of their whereabouts. When at last Marcia consulted her watch, she gave a cry of dismay.

"Good gracious!" she exclaimed. "Do you know that we have been out more than an hour? We must go back at once."

And very shortly after this it was that the difficulty of finding their way back became manifest to both of them. To the unaccustomed eye one shooting-drive is exactly like another; they had already sauntered along three or four of these, and if they now turned to the right instead of to the left they only obeyed the instinct which sways most people who have omitted to provide themselves with a compass.

"I'm awfully sorry," said Archdale, at length, "but it's useless to disguise the truth, and the truth is that I haven't the faintest idea where I am—have you?"

"I know that I am in a dense forest which appears to have no limits," answered Marcia, with a vexed laugh. "The only thing to be done is to follow our noses. Wetherby may be in front of us or behind us; but if we walk straight on I suppose we shall reach the open country before we die."

Archdale could suggest no better course, and, indeed, the result of adopting it was moderately successful, since, after twenty minutes or so, they did emerge upon a hillside whence the chimneys of Wetherby could be descried; but it took them the best part of another half-hour to reach the house, where they met with the reception which their behaviour seemed to have merited. The men had adjourned to the smoking-room, and some of the ladies had gone to bed: but a few still remained with Lady Wetherby, and these evidently approved of the annoyed tone in which she addressed the wanderers.

"We thought you must be lost," she said. "I was just going to send out men with lanterns to search for you. Where *have* you been?"

"We were lost, but we are found again," answered Archdale, who was not easily disconcerted. "You ought to have sign-posts put up in those woods of yours, Lady Wetherby; the Hampton Court maze is nothing to them."

Marcia did not attempt to excuse herself. She knew very well that a jury of her own sex would never acquit her, and that it would be a mere waste of breath to back up her companion's statement; therefore, she only said that she had had a long tramp and was tired out; immediately after

which she took up a bedroom candlestick, wished everybody good night, and retired.

Archdale was preparing to imitate her, when Lady Wetherby laid a detaining hand upon his coat-sleeve. He could not disobey that intimation, so he remained resignedly where he was until he and his hostess were left in sole possession of the drawing-room, when he remarked, "Now I am going to catch it, I suppose. All the same, we *did* lose our way."

"Very likely you did," returned Lady Wetherby curtly. "I have nothing to say about that except that you had no business to lose your way; but one thing I am quite determined about, and that is that I will not allow you the chance of making such a blunder again. I am sorry to appear inhospitable, Mr. Archdale, but I must ask you to go away to-morrow and not to come back until Marcia has left us. You know as well as I do what these people must have thought."

"I give you my word," answered Archdale, "that I am as innocent as a new-born babe. We should have been back ever so long ago if we hadn't unfortunately taken the wrong turning."

"Oh, of course; and in your innocence you will take the wrong turning again on the earliest opportunity. Now, Mr. Archdale, I am going to

be perfectly candid with you. I don't know whether you are a gentleman in the sense that I understand that term or not; but, from the little that I have seen of you, I should think that you had principles of a kind and a vast stock of selfishness. Well, if you go on as you are doing, the chances are that you will cause a permanent rupture between Marcia and her husband. You wouldn't like that, I presume."

"Really," answered Archdale, who, naturally enough, did not relish being told in such plain language that he was no gentleman, "if I possessed the power that you give me credit for, which I don't at all admit, I should not feel that I was guilty of any great crime by exercising it. Her husband is evidently a brute."

"No, he is only an ordinary, honest man, who is clever in some ways and stupid in others; but that is neither here nor there. What I am sure you wouldn't like would be the responsibility of having upon your hands a woman who was separated from her husband through you. I don't pretend to be quick at reading character; but I think I can read yours well enough to understand that much. You had better leave her alone, Mr. Archdale. Anyhow, you can't refuse to be telegraphed for to-morrow morning."

"Of course I can't," agreed Archdale, smiling. "I will be telegraphed for, then, and I will leave by the first train. Nevertheless, you will perhaps excuse my saying that your remarks are almost as unflattering to Mrs. Brett as they are to myself."

Unflattering they might be; but he felt that, at least in so far as they bore reference to himself, they were true. He had no liking for tragedy nor even for that kind of serio-comedy in which the serious element predominates. He adored Mrs. Brett; but he knew that he could live without her, whereas, under existing circumstances, he certainly could not live with her. Therefore it would, without doubt, be right and wise to absent himself from her until such time as his emotions, and possibly also hers, should have become more amenable to restraint. In all honesty and sincerity he desired to do nothing wrong and to harm nobody—least of all himself. He perceived that sooner or later he would have to execute a strategic movement of retreat, and painful though it was to him to be driven away from one to whom (for the time being) his whole heart belonged, there was consolation in the thought that he was being driven away, that he was not retiring of his own free will. He slept quite soundly that night, and on the following morning before breakfast he was

summoned up to London. However, he thought himself bound in common civility to leave a note for Mrs. Brett, in which he expressed deep regret at being compelled to go away without wishing her good-bye, and added that he looked forward to meeting her once more in the autumn, if, as she had given him to understand, he must not venture to invade her summer quarters.

CHAPTER XII.

WILLIE'S FIRST HOLIDAYS.

Mr. Brett had been not a little vexed to hear that Archdale had followed his wife to Wetherby. His sister-in-law, Caroline, who had obtained this information from some source or other, had hastened to impart it to him, and had not failed, while doing so, to point out that such an encounter could hardly be the result of mere chance. He himself had difficulty in believing it to be wholly unpremeditated; so that, although he preferred blaming Archdale to blaming Lady Wetherby or Marcia, he felt that it was his duty to remove the latter as soon as might be from an equivocal position. He managed to arrange an earlier date than had been fixed upon for the commencement of his holiday; he composed the letter of which a portion has been quoted to his wife, and he journeyed down to Lynton in the confident expectation that she would join him there at once. He did not often issue instructions or even express

wishes, but when he did so they were usually complied with; therefore her reply, which reached him two days after his arrival in the far-west locality where he had decided to spend the summer, gave him both surprise and annoyance.

"I am sorry," Marcia wrote, "that you don't like Mr. Archdale; but I can't say that I wonder at it, because you never do like the people whom I like. Luckily, however, he left this morning, and I shall not now have to make myself ridiculous by cutting short my visit here. I should be curious to know who has 'commented upon' the coincidence that you speak of if I couldn't form a tolerable good guess. Pray assure Caroline, with my love, that she is not likely to have the satisfaction of hearing that I have eloped with anybody. You may expect me when Willie's holidays begin; I shall probably pick him up at Farnborough, and bring him with me."

Mr. Brett was at least as averse to making himself ridiculous as Marcia could be, and he was not at all sure that he had escaped committing that act of gratuitous folly. In any case, he did not see his way to despatch a second summons, and he wished with all his heart that he had not been in such a hurry to move down to Devonshire. It was desperately dull in that beautiful, but remote

spot; deprived of his work and his club, he did not know how to get through the long hours, nor could he keep himself from brooding over the disappointments of life, by admiring the changing colours of cliff and moorland or gazing across the Bristol Channel at the faint blue outline of the Welsh coast. To be sure, things would not have been much better if he had had Marcia with him; but that was scarcely a consolatory reflection.

Marcia, meanwhile, found it a very consolatory reflection that her husband had hastened away from London to no purpose. She stood in some need of consolation, because Archdale's precipitate exit had provoked her very much, and she was not so simple as to believe in the telegram which he had put forward as an excuse.

"I suppose this means that you have turned him out of the house, Laura," she took the first opportunity of saying to her friend.

"I didn't exactly turn him out," Lady Wetherby replied composedly, "but I don't deny that I requested him to go. It was entirely your own fault, Marcia, and I am not a bit ashamed of myself; so you needn't scowl at me. What possessed you to lose yourself with him in the woods?"

"As if one did that kind of thing on purpose! I ruined my frock, and a new pair of shoes, and

now—thanks to you—everybody believes that I made that sacrifice for the sake of the man whom you have chased off the premises!"

"Do you suppose that they would have believed anything else if he had remained here? Nothing that you or I could have done would have made them believe that you really lost your way; but I thought to myself, that at least I could take measures to prevent the repetition of such a disaster, and I took them accordingly. Episodes of that kind *are* disasters, you know, Marcia."

Marcia declared that she did not see that at all, and added that only those amiable persons who were always hoping that some disaster might happen to their neighbours would take such a view of an everyday occurrence. She was much incensed against her friend, who ought, she thought, to have stood by her more loyally, nor was she best pleased with Archdale for submitting with meekness to a sentence of banishment. However, she forgave him when she took into account the absolute impossibility of staying in a house of which the mistress has requested you to quit it; she was, besides, all the more ready to forgive him because she felt sure that he must have gone away very reluctantly. In the course of a day or two she felt able to forgive Laura

also, seeing that there was, after all, some justification for the scruples of a lady who was nothing if not conventional: she did not, however, forgive Eustace, for whose insulting innuendoes she could find no justification at all.

Poor Mr. Brett did not deal in innuendoes, and certainly had not meant to be insulting. He only wrote once from Lynton to his wife, and that was merely to say that he would expect her upon the date which she had named. So luckless was he, that Marcia, instead of giving him credit for unselfishness, took this to be but one more proof of his utter indifference. "All he cares for is to avoid scandal," she thought. "Now that he knows Mr. Archdale is out of the way, he wouldn't mind if I remained out of the way too until Doomsday."

Nevertheless, the day upon which she set out from Wetherby to join him was a joyful day for her; for, although there might be no love lost between her and her husband, there was love enough for twenty between her and her son, whom she was going to meet. At least, she hoped that there was. In her case, at all events, separation had brought about no lessening of affection; but of course she could not feel quite so sure of Willie as she did of herself. A boy when he goes to

school, like a girl when she is introduced to society, turns over a fresh leaf in the book of life; he learns a great deal of which he has hitherto been ignorant or has but dimly suspected; he sees the world and humanity with other and clearer, perhaps also with sadder eyes; all of a sudden he becomes a rudimentary man, and in putting away childish things he sometimes puts away childish love and faith with the rest. And to Marcia, who could not know this by experience, but divined it by the aid of that maternal instinct which never errs, was nervous and flustered when the train drew up at Farnborough Station.

But there was Willie waiting for her, with his portmanteau and hat-box, and as soon as he caught sight of her his round face became illumined with smiles, and a minute later she was kissing him and crying over him—though there was nothing to cry about—and she knew before he opened his lips that he was her own dear boy still, and that this first contact with a world which is full of ugly and disheartening experiences had not changed or spoilt him.

Of course she had taken very good care to bribe the guard and keep the carriage to herself. Presently she made Willie stand away from her, and surveyed him critically from head to foot.

"You have grown quite an inch," she said, "and you are improved—oh yes! you are improved. You look stronger, and your shoulders are broader; I think you will be a tall man. Ah! well, I suppose I shall always wish you were back in petticoats again; still it's something to have a son big enough to take care of his poor old mother. Now tell me all about yourself and what you have been doing; for I have heard nothing yet. You don't write at all nice letters, do you know?"

The boy laughed, flung himself down beside his mother, and, putting his arm round her waist, laid his head upon her shoulder just as he had been wont to do in former times.

"One can't say things in letters," he answered; "what do you want to know?"

She wanted to know everything. Who were his friends? had the boys bullied him at first? had he fought any of them? was he getting on well at cricket? And then, as an afterthought, she inquired whether he was taking home a good report from the head-master. "Because your father is sure to ask about that at once, and make a fuss if it isn't perfectly satisfactory."

Fortunately, Willie was able to reply that his father would have no cause to complain of the

report that he had in his pocket; and this was the sole allusion made to Mr. Brett in the course of a long and happy afternoon. In answer to the other questions put to him, Willie had a great deal to say; and all that he said was delightful to listen to, not only because he incidentally revealed his capacity to take care of himself and hold his own amongst his companions, but because it was so evident that his mother still held the first place in his heart. It gave her a passing spasm of pain at her own to remember that she had sometimes forgotten him when she had been enjoying herself; indeed, that she had tried to enjoy herself in order to forget him; whereas he had always been thinking of her, and had treasured up the incidents of his best days to relate to her. But now she was reassured; she would never try to put her boy out of her mind again; his love was sufficient for her, and so long as he cared for her it was little enough that she would trouble her head about Mr. Archdale or anybody else whose friendship might have seemed worth having as a *pis-aller*.

And, being thus light-hearted and content, she was less cold than she had intended to be when, after the long drive from Barnstaple to Lynton, they reached their temporary home and discerned

the tall spare figure of Mr. Brett, who had walked out to the gate to meet them.

"Here we are, Eustace," she said, jumping out of the carriage, "and we are dying of hunger; so I do hope you have ordered an enormous dinner for us. What a pretty place!"

"I am glad you think so," Mr. Brett replied, with his grave smile.

It was unquestionably a very pretty place, and if Marcia admired it in the twilight she admired it still more the next morning, when a fresh breeze was blowing in from the Atlantic, and when she looked from her bedroom window upon the sunlit expanse of sea and the towering headlands of the coast line. The house which Mr. Brett had taken stood upon the very verge of the cliff outside Lynton, and was surrounded by a small garden, where only a few flowering shrubs had managed to survive the fury of the prevailing gales. Far beneath lay Lynmouth, a confused mass of dwellings, collected round the mouth of the little river whence the town takes its name, and by stretching out of the window, and turning her gaze inland, Marcia could catch a glimpse of the woods through which the Lyn hurries down towards the sea. Her first thought was that she and Willie would have some happy days and walks together, boat-

ing and fishing; and her second—which made her smile—was that Eustace would very soon have had enough of Lynton. Eustace did not care for sailing, was not an angler, and had no taste for country walks. It seemed reasonable to expect that he would ere long find himself irresistibly attracted towards the city which he could not ask his wife to inhabit during the summer and autumn.

She had forgotten that Mr. Brett knew how to ride. Her forgetfulness was excusable, because this was an accomplishment which he rarely displayed, and in which he could scarcely be said to excel. He had, however, bethought him that Willie would like to have his pony, and he had had one of the carriage horses sent down for his own use; and so it came to pass that on the very first day the father and son went out together for a gallop over the moor, and Marcia was left out in the cold. This was a disappointment; but she bore it uncomplainingly. She wanted the boy to enjoy his holidays, and she wanted him to acquire some knowledge of horsemanship. After all, if he had not gone out with his father, he would have gone out with the groom, and she would have been equally deprived of his company in either case. What she had not reckoned upon (for how was she to know that hunting ever took

place in summer?) was that the Devon and Somerset hounds would advertise two meets in the neighbourhood in the course of the ensuing week, and that Willie would be wild with excitement at the thought of a run with them. On the first occasion he and Mr. Brett were absent from early morning until dinner-time, when they returned weary but triumphant, having seen plenty of sport and passed through some thrilling experiences which the boy recounted breathlessly. Marcia listened, and tried to be interested, and was in some degree interested. She had had a dull time of it; but she would not, perhaps, have resented that if the jealousy which was a part of her nature had not been aroused by certain evidences of a good-fellowship between the father and the son which had never appeared before.

She astonished Willie that night by entering his bedroom, just after he had laid his tired head upon the pillow, and saying abruptly, "This is what I have always dreaded; you care more for hunting than you do for me, and very soon you will care more for your father (who cares for nobody) than you do for me. Oh, what a miserable thing it is to be a woman!"

The boy opened his sleepy eyes wide and the corners of his mouth dropped.

"What is it, Mummy?" he asked in dismay; "what have I done?"

"Oh, nothing," answered Marcia, half laughing, half crying, and a little ashamed of herself; "it is natural, I suppose, and you can't help yourself. Only, you see, I have had a miserable day all alone here, and I had been hoping that you would take me out for a sail, and—and—oh, well it doesn't matter; but Willie, if you ever love him better than me, you will break my heart!"

There was no danger of her heart being broken from that cause. She received assurances the sincerity of which she could not doubt, and on the following day it was to Mr. Brett that the part of odd man out was assigned; for Willie and his mother, having obtained the requisite permission, went off up the river with a fishing-rod and a luncheon-basket, and only reappeared at nightfall. Doubtless there was some lack of generosity in the satisfaction which Marcia felt on noticing that her husband was in one of his most querulous moods; but it is only human to desire that others should experience what they have inflicted on ourselves, and have an opportunity of judging how they like it: besides, she meant to be very generous on the morrow, which was the day appointed for the second meet of the stag-hounds. She had made

up her mind that she would not grumble at being left, that she would fill up the day by clearing up arrears of correspondence, that she would perhaps go out for a walk in the afternoon and would rejoice unselfishly in the thought that Willie was having a fine time of it.

But when, quite at variance with her custom, she came downstairs early to give the sportsmen their breakfast, lo and behold Willie had not donned the cords and boots of which he was so proud! and presently he announced quietly, in answer to some remark of Mr. Brett's, that he was not going to hunt that day; he was going to take his mother for a sail instead.

Mr. Brett frowned and assumed the aspect which was familiar to unfortunate persons who knew that it meant "forty shillings or a month."

"You must not get into the way of being capricious, Willie," said he; "that is a privilege which is supposed to be reserved for ladies. The horses have been ordered and we shall have to start in ten minutes."

The boy looked down without replying, and after a pause Marcia—though she knew she ought to hold her tongue—could not help pleading, "But if he doesn't want to go, Eustace!"

Mr. Brett smiled somewhat disagreeably and

said, "Is it not rather you who do not want him to go? However, I will leave the choice to him this time. You can hunt or sail to-day as you please, Willie; only you must clearly understand that if you decide upon sailing I shall not take you out with the hounds again. Boys must learn to know their own minds."

He was neither a cruel nor a stupid man; but there was some defect in his perceptions which sometimes caused him to do cruel and stupid things. He really believed that he was right to place the boy in that dilemma; he did not understand that no human being with a particle of spirit could yield to such a threat.

Willie raised his eyes, which expressed some regret, a little compunction and a touch of perplexity, but answered without hesitating, "I'd rather go out sailing, please."

"Very well," returned his father briefly, and at once left the room.

Marcia caught the boy's hand and pressed it to her lips. "Oh, how good you are to me!" she exclaimed. Her face was beaming with joy and triumph; probably that moment was one of the happiest that she had ever known.

Willie laughed and looked pleased; yet it was evident that his mind was not quite easy nor his

pleasure wholly unalloyed. "I say," he asked, after Marcia had been expatiating for some minutes upon the fun that was in store for them, "do you think he was awfully sold?"

"Who?—Your father? I hope he was, for I am sure he deserved to be. I never heard of anything so shabby as his saying that he wouldn't take you out hunting again. But he will when the time comes; we needn't bother about that now. And don't you flatter yourself that he will miss you; it is only I who am wretched when you are out of sight."

"Well, I don't know," said Willie musingly; "he was quite—quite jolly, you know, the other day while the hounds were running."

Marcia burst out laughing. "Eustace *jolly!* Well, let us hope that he will be jolly again to-day when he joins them; for I suppose he intends to go."

Mr. Brett, however, had no such intention, and Willie guessed that, though his mother did not. Nor, in all probability, did she guess that the poor little fellow had made what for him was a very great sacrifice in order to please her. It was her nature to accept sacrifices, sometimes even to demand them, and in this little scene, which had brought the character of the three persons con-

cerned so singularly into prominence, she had comprehended only one point—but that, to be sure, was a most important one—that Willie loved her best.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE APPROACH OF THE INEVITABLE.

Amongst the various accomplishments which Willie Brett had acquired—for he was a steady and painstaking lad—that of sailing a boat was not one. However, anybody can run before the wind, and the light north-westerly breeze which took him and his mother out of Lynmouth harbour served them very well for a couple of hours, by the end of which time they had progressed for a considerable distance down the coast. Marcia was as happy as a child, and when she was happy her conversation was apt to be as spontaneous and unthinking as that of children generally is and always ought to be. She was a good deal more childish than her son, who listened to what she had to say with curiosity and with some sadness. In certain ways he was wise beyond his years, in others he was not : so that, although he was quite aware that his father and mother did not get on well together, he failed to draw the deductions

which more experienced persons might have drawn from the circumstance that the latter did not disguise the melancholy fact, whereas the former never alluded to it.

"When you are grown up," Marcia was saying, "we will travel about together and amuse ourselves. I want to see Russia and Greece and Egypt and heaps of places; but it would be no fun to go there with your father, who would be bored to death the whole time. I often wonder what made me marry your father!"

"Would you rather have married somebody else?" asked Willie, after a moment or two of grave reflection.

Marcia laughed. "Oh, I don't know. No; nobody in particular. But girls are such idiots—worse even than men, which is saying something. I suppose I thought it was rather a feather in my cap to have captured an admirer whom nobody else could capture; I didn't ask myself whether he was worth capturing. How horrified your Aunt Caroline would be if she could hear me talking to you in this way!" she added presently. "I dare say it is very wrong of me; only I can't help it. I am not going to be a humbug with you, whatever I may be with the rest of the world."

No wonder the boy loved her all the more for her

frankness, and no wonder he came to the conclusion that his father was wholly and solely to blame for an estrangement which seemed to him to be deplorable. It was an impression which never became quite obliterated, and, although in after years his reason sometimes convicted him of injustice, his heart always remained on the side of the affectionate, impulsive, selfish woman for whom his sentiments were fraternal rather than filial. Even now he thought it right to pave the way for a possible disappointment by reminding her that when he was grown up his time would not be his own. He was going to be a soldier, he informed her, and the movements of soldiers were, of course, a good deal hampered by the claims of their Queen and their country. "But when I get leave we'll go off on the spree, somewhere," he added encouragingly.

"I wish you were not going to be in any profession!" sighed the foolish Marcia. "It is having a profession that makes men so hard-hearted. They know that, whatever happens, they have that to fall back upon, whereas we have nothing. However, we needn't bother ourselves about the future yet; it is still a long way off, thank Heaven!"

And, indeed, the present soon became sufficiently interesting to engage all their attention; for the

wind, after dropping, veered a point or two to the east of north and freshened considerably; insomuch that the stolid, somnolent boatman who had accompanied them expressed doubts about their getting back into harbour by sunset. They had sailed and drifted a long way down channel by this time, and Willie's nautical capacities were hardly equal to making the most that could be made out of a dead foul breeze. Moreover, a lumpy sea was getting up which neither he nor his mother altogether relished.

They both behaved as well as people who are going to be sea-sick can be expected to behave. They did not say much; from time to time they exchanged glances which were at first interrogative, then despairing; finally the proprietor of the craft took the tiller, and they sank into that state of total indifference and degradation at which few of us are entitled to sneer. For how long they underwent the misery of beating towards their destination and receiving occasional drenching showers of spray they neither knew nor cared. Naturally it seemed like a lifetime, and not less naturally they remained entirely oblivious of Mr. Brett and the anxiety from which he might be supposed to be suffering by reason of their protracted absence. But when at length they reached Lynmouth in the

twilight there was Mr. Brett, waiting for them on the landing-steps, and, notwithstanding their forlorn and draggled appearance, it was little enough sympathy that he had at their service.

"Dinner was ready more than an hour ago," was his greeting, spoken in a very harsh tone of voice. "Really, Marcia, this kind of thing must not occur again. I thought you must have been drowned."

"We have been much worse than drowned," returned Marcia dolefully; "we have died a hundred deaths! As for its occurring again, you may make your mind easy about that; I have had enough of boating to last me to my dying day. Now, if you want to scold, Eustace, you can scold; but you may just as well spare yourself the trouble, for we are absolutely callous. We don't want any dinner; we don't care whether you are hungry or not; we don't care a penny about anybody or anything in the wide world."

Mr. Brett was very cross, and would have liked to relieve his feelings by scolding the delinquents a little; but, under the circumstances, he could only hold his peace, and they all walked up the hill to Lynton in solemn silence. As, however, his wife, in spite of what she had said, proved able to eat a tolerably good dinner, he thought that, after Willie

had gone to bed, he might without brutality give utterance to certain reflections over which he had been brooding throughout the day.

"I confess that your conduct to-day seems to me to have been a little inconsiderate, Marcia," he began; "but I won't dwell on that; you would, of course, only point out to me that you have no control over the elements. Still I should like to ask you just this: What object can you possibly have in thwarting me when I try as well as I can to gain some share of our boy's affections? I know well enough—and so do you—that the utmost I can hope to obtain is a very small share of them. Why should you grudge me that? Seriously, do you think that our life, which is already so pleasant, will be made pleasanter when you have broken the one link which still binds you and me together?"

"Oh, you consider, then, that Willie is the only link which still binds us together? It is candid of you to say so, at all events, and, after such a polite speech as that, I wouldn't for the world try to snap it. At the same time, I don't see why I should be accused of such sinister designs because I took Willie out in a boat with me for once. Didn't you take him out hunting the other day?"

"Yes; and for that reason you prevented my taking him again. We will not exchange recrimi-

nations, nor, I think, would there be much use in affecting to ignore the obvious truth—which is, that we have next to nothing in common. This may be my fault, or it may be yours, or there may be faults on both sides; we need not discuss a question to which no satisfactory answer is likely to be found. But you might answer the question which I have just put to you? Is it worth your while to poison the boy's mind against me for the sake of making my life a little more wretched than it is?"

If there was anything pathetic in this appeal, Marcia failed to detect the pathos; she was only irritated and angered by reproaches which seemed to her quite undeserved. "You don't really believe that I have poisoned Willie's mind against you, Eustace," she returned, "and you don't really care whether he is fond of you or not. I can't help your life being wretched; it is you yourself who have chosen to make it so, and I suppose what you mean is that you would like to make mine wretched too. Well, it isn't particularly happy, I must admit. Every word that you have been saying to me I might have said to you, and with a good deal more justice. I have never attempted to thwart you in any way; but of late you have done all in your power to thwart me, and I can't imagine any

other cause for this sudden anxiety of yours to make friends with Willie."

Mr. Brett made a gesture of impatience and weariness. "Well, well," said he; "we will drop the subject. I wish you were less perverse, Marcia; but I will make no more efforts to overcome your perversity. I shall, however, make some efforts to be more successful as a father than I have been as a husband."

The poor man's chance of success in either character was but small, Heaven having denied him the gift of sympathy; but after this he took great pains to give Willie pleasure. He felt bound to keep his word and eschew hunting; but the boy and he had some long rides together, which both of them enjoyed, and in the course of which they became a shade more intimate than they had previously been. He was quite right in believing that Marcia grudged him even this modest victory; her restless jealousy was for ever upon the alert; there was a perpetual rivalry and antagonism between her and her husband; nor did she breathe freely until the latter, after a holiday which had lasted barely a month, returned to London, leaving her in sole charge of the subject of their contention.

A brief period of happiness followed; but this was clouded towards its close by the shadow of the

imminent parting. "I shall miss you a thousand times more than you will miss me, Willie," sighed Marcia, when the day appointed for the re-assembling of the Farnborough school came; and she was glad to see how serious and sorrowful he looked as he replied—

"Oh no, you won't. You are going to stay with your friends and have lots of fun; I haven't anything to look forward to, except football and the Christmas holidays."

Well, it was doubtful whether much fun was in store for her: but, as was always the case at that time of year, she had received invitations from many country houses, and of course she could neither join Mr. Brett in London nor remain at Lynton all by herself. Her first move was into Wiltshire, where she formed one of a large party and encountered numerous London acquaintances who were delighted to see her. From thence she went on to Dorsetshire, Hampshire, and Kent, meeting everywhere with a warm welcome; for she was popular, by reason not only of her beauty but of her admirable social qualities, and, since popularity was as the breath of her nostrils to her, she could not feel very low-spirited, notwithstanding the good reasons which she conceived that she had for being so. One of these undoubtedly was that

in the course of her peregrinations she heard nothing at all about Archdale. She had more than half expected that he would take the trouble to find out what her movements were likely to be, and would have made his own coincide with them, and she felt it as something of a slight that he had neglected to do this. Had he put in an appearance at any of the houses where she was visiting, she would in all probability have given him to understand that she was annoyed with him for pursuing her; but, as he did not, she thought a good deal more about him than she would otherwise have done, and allowed herself some bitter mental strictures upon the instability of men's friendship. Moreover, she experienced a great longing to tell some sympathizing person how very unkind Eustace had been to her throughout the summer. She had an uneasy desire to hear Eustace condemned and her own opinion of him confirmed; for the truth was that her opinion of him—or at least what she imagined to be her opinion—had changed very much for the worse of late. If she had never loved him, she had not hitherto disliked him; but now she occasionally felt something very like hatred for the cold, dispassionate man who had weighed her in the balance and found her wanting, and who, as she was persuaded, would be only too thankful

to get rid of her, if such a proceeding could be made to accord with his pharisaical notions of morality. She herself, being by no means pharisaical, often wished that an amicable separation could be arranged. By his own confession, Willie was their sole remaining bond of union, and, although he had deprecated the severing of that bond, she was very sure that his wish to maintain it arose from no sentiment of natural affection. There were moments when she felt as if it would be almost impossible for her to continue living with Eustace. Yet he had not altered; his virtues and his failings were just what they had been from the first.

She put off her return home from week to week; but at last she could postpone it no longer, and early in November she arrived in Cornwall Terrace to find her husband looking a little older, a little more tired, and a little more cross than he had done in the summer.

"Now that you have arrived, Marcia," was his greeting, "I trust that I shall sometimes be provided with a dinner which I can eat. As you know, I am easily satisfied; but the food which has been set before me lately has been simply unfit for human consumption, and no attention whatsoever has been vouchsafed to my remonstrances."

Marcia shrugged her shoulders. "Why didn't you dismiss the cook, then?" she asked. That a good wife is before all things, and above all things a good housekeeper, was a view which he had frequently expressed, and with which she had never agreed; but she had not at any previous time gone so far as to stigmatize it inwardly as a barbarous and revolting view. At that season of the year she had comparatively few friends in London, and dined at home on most nights in the week, so that she could judge for herself of the cook's performances as well as listen to her husband's comments upon them. Very terrible those *tête-à-tête* dinners were to her. Mr. Brett, who was engaged in writing a pamphlet upon some abstruse point of law which seemed to occupy all his thoughts, seldom spoke, and did not always remember to answer when he was spoken to. The only comfort was, that as soon as dinner was over he betook himself to his study and was no more seen. It was better that he should do that than that he should sit gloomily in the drawing-room without opening his lips; still, it was not very amusing to be left entirely alone, and Marcia naturally wished that she could think of somebody sufficiently interesting to be asked to come and relieve her solitude occasionally.

One afternoon, she was wandering through a picture-gallery in Bond Street, when she caught sight of a friend whom she was so pleased to recognize, that she quite forgot certain reasons which she had for being offended with him.

"Please don't cut me, Mr. Archdale," said she, laughing; "I really can't afford to be cut by the only acquaintance whom I have come across for three days."

The young man started and took off his hat, colouring slightly. For a moment he looked quite shy, but quickly recovered himself and seemed to be as delighted to see Mrs. Brett as he declared that he was. "I had no idea you were in London," he added.

"Where else should I be?" she asked. "Don't you know that I live here?"

"Oh yes; and so do I, for the matter of that. But it is my privilege to be often absent from home, and I fancied that it was yours too."

"I only wish it were! I have been paying a few visits during the autumn, but I have come to the end of them now, and I have a long period of domestic felicity to look forward to. And what have you been doing all this time?"

They sat down and he gave an account of himself. He had spent part of the summer in Belgium

and Holland: then he had been at Wetherby, "working like a horse," and now he proposed to be more or less in London, for a good many months to come. "And you?" he inquired. "Have you been having a pretty good time of it? How did you like Lynton?"

Marcia made a grimace. "Lynton was well enough, though I didn't have a particularly good time of it even there; but, since my boy went back to school, I have been chiefly occupied in counting the days to Christmas. Christmas is still a long way off," she added, with a sigh. "However, now that you are here, perhaps you will look in upon me every now and then, and cheer me up."

"Of course I should like nothing better than to call upon you, Mrs. Brett—if I may," answered Archdale, somewhat hesitatingly.

It may seem improbable, but it is nevertheless true, that up to that moment Marcia had not given a thought to the circumstances under which she had last seen her interlocutor. When these were recalled to her memory by his questioning glance, she was momentarily embarrassed; but she said, with a laugh, "You may and you must. That is, if you care at all about retaining my friendship. I couldn't promise you a very hearty welcome from Mr. Brett; but Mr. Brett only comes home in time

to dress for dinner, and perhaps you are not overwhelmingly anxious to see him."

Afterwards she remembered this speech, and wondered how she could have said anything so liable to misconstruction; but Archdale seemed to take it quite as a matter of course.

"I'll take care to be out of the house before the dressing-bell rings," was his reply. "I shall turn up about five o'clock to-morrow, and I'm afraid, if I consult my own inclinations, I shall turn up at that hour on most days of the week. You will have to give me a hint when you have had enough of me."

Marcia nodded and smiled. "That is a woman's privilege," she observed. "However, you are still better off than we are; because, when you are tired of us, you can simply drop us, without being reduced to the painful necessity of hinting as much. I must go now. Till to-morrow, then."

So she departed, leaving behind her a man who —perhaps for the first time in his life—was troubled by conscientious scruples.

CHAPTER XIV.

A CHOICE OF EVILS.

It has already been mentioned that Archdale possessed as an intimate friend one Mr. Alfred Drake, who occasionally did him the honour to borrow a little money of him, and sometimes (after a prosperous week at Newmarket, or a night of luck at a certain club) even went so far as to repay the amount. Now it so chanced that, on the morning after Archdale's meeting with Marcia Brett, Mr. Drake looked in upon his friend, whom he found in a somewhat absent and dejected frame of mind; and, judging of these symptoms by the light of previous experience, he soon inquired—

"Well, what's the matter now? Has she thrown you over? Or has the husband kicked you downstairs?"

"I really don't know who you are talking about," answered Archdale.

"Nor do I, my dear fellow, and I wouldn't for

the world be so indiscreet as to ask her name. I suppose it is one of them, though."

Archdale, who thought highly of Mr. Drake's shrewdness and common sense, not unfrequently asked that gentleman's advice, which of course was quite another thing from taking it. He thought he would ask Drake's advice now.

"The truth is," said he, "that I am in rather a fix. At least, I'm afraid I am in some danger of getting into a fix. I told you some months ago about Mrs. Brett, you know. Well, in the beginning of the summer I met her at Wetherby, where she was staying, and where, as I think I must have mentioned to you, I had a commission to execute. I didn't see very much of her; but one evening we went out for a walk after dinner, and unluckily we missed our way, and came back rather late. So then there was a—I don't exactly know what to call it."

Mr. Drake had lighted a cigar and had selected the most comfortable chair that he could find. "A shindy?" he suggested blandly.

"Oh no; nothing of the sort. But Lady Wetherby got up on her hind-legs, and said that sort of thing wouldn't do, and she must request me to go away and stay away until Mrs. Brett had left. So I went."

"So I should imagine. People generally do go away when they are turned out of the house."

"Well, of course. But the fact is I couldn't help feeling that Lady Wetherby was right. It seems that old Brett was getting jealous—and—and he's a horrid old brute, and of course she must hate him."

Archdale paused, and Mr. Drake, for some reason or other, laughed.

"Now I want you to understand just this," resumed the former presently: "nobody could have behaved better than I have about it. I saw that I ought to make myself scarce, and I did. I haven't written to her, I haven't attempted to see her or find out where she was,—though I don't mind telling you that I have been simply dying for news of her all this time,—it wasn't any fault of mine that I came across her yesterday at a picture-gallery, and that she asked me to go and see her. Now, what is one to do in such a case as that?"

"Oh, I know what you'll do," answered Drake unhesitatingly; "you'll go and see her. You'll be a fool for your pains; but I dare say you know that as well as I do. Nothing that I can say will prevent your going; but one precaution I do beg of you to take, otherwise there's no knowing what trouble you may not get into: don't make any

mystery of your visit. If I were in your place, I should leave a card for the husband."

"I don't think you quite understand my difficulty; I was thinking of her, not of any possible future discomfort to myself. My feeling is that, for her sake, it might perhaps be better that we should not meet just at present. And yet——"

"Oh, I see!" said Drake, laughing; "these are the penalties that one has to pay for being so irresistible. Well, you are merciful, my dear boy, if you aren't over and above modest, and these scruples are most creditable to you, I'm sure. Only, as there isn't the very slightest chance of your acting upon them, I don't know that they will be of much practical use to you or Mrs. Brett or anybody else."

"I suppose that means that if you were in my place you would call."

"I think I told you what I should do if I were in your place. I should call—and I should leave a card for Mr. Brett."

That was enough for Archdale. He called at Cornwall Terrace the same afternoon, and if he did not leave a card for Mr. Brett he only refrained from doing so in obedience to a hint which he could not disregard.

"I shall not tell my husband that you have been

here," Marcia informed him laughingly. "My husband, I am afraid, is not precisely devoted to you, and perhaps it would be hardly worth while to let him know that you are in London."

The speech, though doubtless unwise, was scarcely unpardonable. Archdale accepted it as merely an additional proof of Mrs. Brett's candour and innocence; and, notwithstanding his disinclination to involve himself in what to many persons might wear the appearance of a perilous intrigue, he repeated his visit the next day, and the day after that and every day. Marcia made no secret of the pleasure that it gave her to see him. Sometimes during the preceding season she had thought him a little bit wanting in delicacy, perhaps a shade vulgar; but she did not think him so now. He seemed to have a perfect understanding of her situation and her trials; she could see that he was very sorry for her, although he refrained from saying as much in plain words, and, if she could see a little more than that, how was the poor fellow to help himself? There are certain emotions which it is really impossible to conceal, and the utmost that can be required of any frail mortal is that he should keep silence with reference to them.

Archdale kept silence with his tongue and only spoke with his eyes; so that Marcia was almost as

sorry for him as she was for herself, or as he was for her. Perhaps, too, she rather enjoyed the quasi-clandestine character of their interviews, which invested them with something of the glamour of romance.

"I often wish I were dead!" she sighed, one afternoon, when he was sitting, as usual, beside her tea-table. "I have made an utter fiasco of my life, and Providence doesn't allow us a chance of profiting by our experience. It would have been a great deal better never to have been born than to be as discontented as I am."

"I wish"—began Archdale, and then stopped short.

"Well?" said Marcia interrogatively.

"Oh, I was going to say a very shocking thing; I was going to say that I wished Mr. Brett had never been born. But perhaps, after all, that is wishing him no evil, and perhaps it isn't wishing myself any good. I suppose, if you hadn't married him, you would have married some other brute."

This, of course, was tantamount to a declaration; but Marcia was accustomed to such innuendoes and was not embarrassed by them. "Do you think I have an unconquerable predilection for brutes, then?" she asked smilingly.

"No; I only meant to say that you would have

married somebody whom I should have considered a brute. All men are more or less of brutes, I'm afraid, and certainly no man is good enough to be your husband, Mrs. Brett."

To some people sweet things are poison, while others, of more robust constitution, swallow them and enjoy them and appear to thrive upon them. Marcia, who belonged to the latter class, was not repelled by the above somewhat sweeping assertion, and was about to make an appropriate rejoinder, when the door was suddenly thrown open and Lady Brett was announced.

The virtuous Caroline sailed up the room, holding out both her hands, as her habit was. It was also a habit of hers to kiss her sister-in-law, who did not like that ceremony, but submitted to it, and wiped away the traces with her pocket-handkerchief on the earliest opportunity. Archdale, looking on, thought to himself that he would pay a good round sum to be excused from kissing Lady Brett; but he was in no danger of being placed in any such dilemma, and the very cold bow with which his presence was acknowledged was a sufficient indication of her ladyship's sentiments with regard to him. However, in order to remove any possible doubt that might exist upon the point, Caroline hastened to say—

"My dear Marcia, I am only in London for a few days, and I am most anxious to hear all your news. Especially about poor Eustace, who, I am afraid, is very little the better for his short holiday. I hoped that I should find you—disengaged."

"I'll go away," said Archdale, getting up and laughing.

But Marcia motioned to him to resume his seat and answered: "Please don't; we are not going to talk secrets. Indeed, I don't think I have any news, secret or otherwise, to give you, Caroline," she added. "Eustace, to the best of my belief, is neither better nor worse than he was before we went to Lynton. He wasn't ill then, and he isn't ill now."

Lady Brett shook her head, smiled sadly and sighed. "Eustace never complains," she observed; "but one cannot look at him without seeing that he often suffers. Invalids learn to detect symptoms which I dare say are not noticed by people in robust health."

"But surely," exclaimed Marcia, "you don't call yourself an invalid! I am thankful to say that I am perfectly healthy, but I can't flatter myself that I look as strong as you do."

A more dire affront could not have been uttered,

and of that Marcia was perfectly well aware. The fact was, that Lady Brett had declared war by ostentatiously turning her shoulder towards Archdale, and when once war has been declared it is doubtless best to assume the offensive.

"It is kind of you to say that, dear," returned Caroline sweetly; "only of course you cannot be sincere. The doctor was quite shocked when he saw me yesterday, though nobody knows better than he what a wretched state of health I am in. However, I am so far like Eustace that I try to avoid egotism, and I have no doubt that, so long as we can manage to get through our daily duties, healthy people will give us credit for being as strong as they are. You have good accounts of Willie, I hope?"

She remained for about half an hour, being evidently determined to outstay Archdale, who was equally determined not to be outstayed, and affecting not to notice the efforts which Marcia made from time to time to draw him into the conversation. When at length she was compelled to take her leave, and when he politely held the door open for her, she favoured him with another distant salute, but ignored his outstretched hand.

"Do you know what that woman will do?" asked Marcia, as soon as Lady Brett was out of

the room. "She will feel it her duty to tell Eustace that I see far too much of you, and that you ought not to be admitted during his absence."

"Oh, I hope she won't be so ill-natured as that," answered Archdale, who, nevertheless, had an uncomfortable conviction that she would.

"Caroline," answered Marcia, "is ill-natured enough for anything, and she hates me so cordially that if she couldn't find anything true to say against me, she would certainly invent something false. But really I don't care, if you don't."

Lady Brett was too good a Christian to hate anybody; what she hated was, of course, the sin, not the sinner. Still, sinners must occasionally be made to suffer for their sins, and, as Marcia had rightly divined, she felt it to be an imperative duty to warn Eustace that his domestic happiness was being trifled with. The letter to that effect which she had begun to compose on her way downstairs was, however, not despatched; for just as she reached the hall-door whom should she encounter but Eustace himself, who at that moment was in the act of letting himself in with his latch-key.

She greeted him effusively, drew him into his study and administered her little dose of poison in a most affectionate and considerate way. She was sure he would believe her when she said that

nothing was further from her mind than a desire to make mischief; yet she could not think that his sanction had been given to the very intimate footing upon which Mr. Archdale stood with "poor, dear Marcia." Poor dear Marcia might see nothing wrong in what she was doing—very likely she did not—but it was not to be expected that she would escape the condemnation of a censorious world, while there could, unhappily, be very little doubt about the interpretation which would be placed upon her behaviour by a man of Mr. Archdale's character.

"And he is here every day; I ascertained that from—from what was said in my presence," continued Lady Brett, who shrank from confessing that she had stooped to make inquiries of the butler. "I do hope you will be firm, dear Eustace, and put a stop to this at once. It will be a trial for you to speak to Marcia about it, I know; but sooner or later you will be compelled to speak, and nothing is gained by putting off the evil day."

Very brief and very chilling were the replies which Mr. Brett vouchsafed to his sister-in-law; yet, such as they were, they convinced her that she had alarmed him. "So he didn't know that that man was in the habit of drinking tea at his

house every day," she thought, as she drove away. "I was sure he didn't!"

Mr. Brett had been ignorant, not only of that, but of the fact that Archdale was in London, and it was not an agreeable reflection to him that his wife had deceived him in the matter. He walked slowly upstairs, wondering what he ought to do or say, and disliking intensely the situation into which he had been forced by circumstances. From such situations few men can extricate themselves with dignity, and fewer still with any approach to triumph. The majority, it would appear, close their eyes or turn their backs and hope for the best. But Mr. Brett, who did not belong to the majority, was neither a coward nor a humbug. His unswerving custom was to act according to his lights and obey the voice of his conscience; it was certain that he would always do what he deemed to be right and scarcely less certain that he would always do it in the wrong way.

His face was very stern and his manner more repellent than usual when he entered the drawing-room and held out his thin, cold hand to the artist. "How do you do, Mr. Archdale?" said he. "I hear that you have already done us the honour to call more than once. I should of course have returned your visits if I had been told of them. Please accept my apologies."

He was painfully conscious of being ridiculous; but he did not see how that could be helped. It was essential—or at any rate he thought so—that Archdale should be snubbed and that Marcia should be put to confusion; as for himself, it was to be presumed that they both despised him already; so that it did not greatly signify what sort of figure he might cut in their opinion. He was so far successful that Marcia was visibly confused; but to snub Archdale was no such easy matter.

"I believe," replied the latter tranquilly, "that it is I who owe you an apology, Mr. Brett. I ought to have dropped a card upon the hall-table as I went out; but I quite forgot to do it, and I never dreamt of expecting a busy man like you to call upon me. Not that I shouldn't be charmed to see you if you cared to look in at my studio any day. It is rather empty just at present, I am sorry to say; still I have one or two completed pictures to exhibit, and I should be glad to hear your criticisms upon them."

"I am not qualified to criticise pictures," answered Mr. Brett curtly.

He remained standing; so that Archdale, who had risen to shake hands with him, could not very well sit down again. There was an awkward

moment of silence, which Marcia terminated by remarking—

"Caroline has been here. She came to inquire after your health, and seemed to think me very heartless when I told her that, so far as I knew, there was nothing the matter with you. Perhaps you met her as you came in?"

"Yes—I met her as I came in," answered Mr. Brett, raising his eyes and looking steadily at his wife for an instant. He had no intention of denying that Caroline was answerable for so unusual an event as his appearance in the drawing-room at that hour.

Archdale glanced at his watch and said he must be off. Perhaps it was not so much bravado as a wish to appear as though he had nothing to conceal that made him add on taking leave of Marcia: "I hope you may be persuaded to come and look at my poor daubs some time or other. Mr. Brett, I'm afraid, won't."

When the husband and wife were left together, Mr. Brett opened fire without delay. "I cannot allow you to go to that man's studio, Marcia," said he. "I must also request that you will cease to receive him here, as I understand that you have been doing lately. I confess that I am surprised at your having said nothing to me about these visits of his."

"I did not think that you would be interested in hearing who had called," answered Marcia. "You have never seemed to be so before. If Caroline says that Mr. Archdale is to be forbidden the house, of course it must be done. Only you must do it yourself, please. I really cannot undertake to insult my friends at your bidding or even at Caroline's."

"You are not asked to insult anybody, Marcia, nor have I the slightest wish to deprive you of the many friends of yours who are not my friends. But as regards Mr. Archdale, I have already given you reasons for avoiding the reality or the appearance of intimacy with him. If you do not think those reasons good, it would probably be out of my power to convince you that they are so. I must, therefore, however reluctantly, claim the authority to which I am entitled. But I hope that, for your own sake as well as mine, you will not compel me to give any orders upon the subject to the servants."

"What do you expect me to do, then? Am I to write to Mr. Archdale and say, 'My husband will not allow me to receive your visits, which in his opinion are compromising me'?"

"I should not think that it would be necessary to be so explicit. If you yourself desired to get

rid of a troublesome acquaintance, you would no doubt find some easy and polite way of dismissing him. At any rate, that is a matter of detail which I will gladly leave in your hands."

Mr. Brett smiled faintly as he spoke, and his smile, which was in reality expressive of nothing but relief at the thought that he had got through a most distasteful task, seemed to Marcia to be one of triumph.

"A troublesome acquaintance!" she exclaimed. "Of course I could get rid of a troublesome acquaintance; so could any fool. But Mr. Archdale is much more than an acquaintance; he is a friend, who knows that I value his friendship, and if I am to cut him in future, he will naturally demand an explanation. When he does, I shall give him the true one."

"Well, I am not prepared to say that that would be a bad plan. So far as I am concerned, he is quite welcome to the information that I can no longer permit him to be my wife's friend."

Marcia, whose nerves had been out of gear for some time past, and who was always irritated by her husband's cold impassibility, lost all control over herself. "I can't endure this!" she ejaculated; "it is too insulting and humiliating! If you were jealous I could forgive you, though I

might think you unreasonable; but you are not. You don't care one atom for me, or for what may become of me; it is only that Caroline has frightened you by telling you that you will have a scandal in the family unless you mind what you are about. She has no right to say such things, and you have no right to believe them—no gentleman would. As for me, I am tired of being suspected and spied upon. I would rather make an end of it, once for all."

"You speak harshly and unjustly," observed Mr. Brett; "but perhaps that is not surprising. When you have had leisure to reflect more coolly you will, I hope, see that I have simply done my duty, and that I have not deserved such language. I doubt whether any protestations of affection on my part would be welcome to you; still, as a mere question of fact, you must, I suppose, be aware that all the years of our married life have made no change in my love for you."

"It is just possible that you may think you are speaking the truth, Eustace. I dare say you can always manage to persuade yourself that you are speaking the truth. But the real truth is that we made a most miserable mistake when we married, and that our only chance of escaping misery for the rest of our lives is to part. I know what you

will say: separations are not respectable. All I can tell you is that I have done my very best to escape what I now feel to be a matter of sheer necessity. I can't bear it any longer! If I were to continue living with you I verily believe I should go mad. We need not quarrel; but we can live apart, and Willie, if you insist upon it, can divide his time between us. There is no help for it: sooner or later it must have come to this."

Mr. Brett was standing beside the table, slowly turning a paper-cutter between his fingers. He answered gravely, without raising his eyes: "I shall never be able to forget what you have said, Marcia; but at present it is impossible for me to judge whether you are serious or whether you are under the influence of excitement. I will speak to you again to-morrow morning before I go out, or on my return in the afternoon: just now it would be both useless and painful to both of us to prolong this conversation."

He left the room at once, while Marcia, with tears in her eyes and clenched hands, cried aloud: "I hate him!—I hate him!"

Possibly she did hate him; in any case she was furiously angry with him and truly sorry for herself. Moreover, she was sincere in her belief that she must leave him if she wished to retain posses-

sion of her senses. There is a great deal to be said against amicable separations, and there is a great deal to be said against having your arm or your leg cut off; but a choice of evils is among the most common of human experiences.

CHAPTER XV.

WILLIE DISAPPROVES.

It is almost invariably the impetuous people who get their own way in this world; but it is to the phlegmatic that the majority of victories (that is to say, all the unimportant ones) fall, and thus the latter usually gain a reputation for firmness which it would be ungenerous to grudge them, since that represents about the sum of their gains. Mr. Brett was so far successful that when Marcia rose on the following morning she was suffering from the effects of reaction, and was ready to haul down her colours for the time being. She had lived long enough to know that a woman who is separated from her husband is in a very false position; she could not but acknowledge that, as regarded the particular point in dispute, Eustace had a better case than she could put forward; she perceived also that so long as she remained under his roof it would be impossible for her to defy him. She might, indeed, refuse to give her

friend his dismissal; but her friend would nevertheless be dismissed. All things considered, therefore, it seemed best to sit down and write the subjoined letter—

"Dear Mr. Archdale,

"I am very sorry that I must ask you not to come here any more for the present. I have spoken to you frankly—more frankly, perhaps, than I ought to have done — about my husband; so that I dare say you will see how it is that I am obliged to make this inhospitable request. I would rather not say any more than this about it; only I hope you will understand that I do not wish our acquaintanceship to cease. The loss of your visits will be a very real loss to me; but it is, I think, an inevitable one, and all I can tell you is that it will always be a great pleasure to me if I should chance to meet you anywhere except in my own house.

"Believe me, very sincerely yours,

"Marcia Brett."

Mr. Brett had left for the police-court before this somewhat imprudent epistle was composed; but he returned straight home after his day's work was done, instead of going to his club, as

usual, and he found his wife waiting for him in the drawing-room with the air of a saint and a martyr. As was to be expected, the lapse of twenty-four hours had exercised a different influence upon him from that which it had produced upon her. Without any introductory remarks, he began—

"I have been thinking over what you said to me yesterday, Marcia, and I have been obliged, much against my will, to admit that your wish to live apart from me is not an unnatural one. I myself have religious objections, which I presume that you do not share, to the dissolution of any marriage; but setting those aside, I still think that there are others which ought to make you pause before taking a step which would be virtually irrevocable. It is only too true that we are not in sympathy with one another, and that there is little, if any, hope of our ever being able now to live together upon such terms as are desirable between husband and wife; but we have to consider our child as well as ourselves. It is on his account that I beg you for a little forbearance which I would not ask for on my own. You must see what a serious misfortune it would be for him to know that his parents had quarrelled, and to be compelled—as, in the nature of things, he

would be compelled—to take one side or the other. I say nothing of your own future as a married woman without a husband; you have probably weighed the advantages against the disadvantages of such a position. But I do appeal to you, for Willie's sake, to consider whether some sort of *modus vivendi* cannot be agreed upon between us. I am willing to make any concession that I can honestly and honourably make; but, rightly or wrongly, I hold an opinion which I cannot change to the effect that it is a husband's duty to protect his wife from slander; and that is why I must maintain my prohibition against your intimacy with Mr. Archdale."

This harangue was delivered in slow, unmodulated accents, and gave the impression of having been learnt (as indeed it had been) by heart. To Marcia it was offensive in a degree which its author, who thought it decidedly conciliatory, was quite incapable of realizing.

"I have written to Mr. Archdale," she replied, "and I have told him that I do not wish him to come here any more. I may, and I probably shall, meet him elsewhere, and if I do meet him I shall not cut him dead. You will hardly expect that of me, I suppose?"

"No; I do not expect that; I do not even wish

it. I am not sure whether I have made it clear to you, Marcia, that this is to my mind a mere matter of expediency. As you said yesterday, I am not jealous of Mr. Archdale, and I may add that I have confidence in your sense of what is due to yourself as well as to me. But neither you nor I can afford to despise the gossip of our neighbours."

"Oh, I can quite enter into your feelings," answered Marcia, with a touch of scorn, "and I agree with you that we had better keep up appearances as long as it is possible to keep them up. Whether it will always be possible is more than I can tell yet; but I will do my best. It seems to me that I have been doing my best for a very long time, and the result hasn't been particularly encouraging."

Mr. Brett made no rejoinder, having in truth none to make. Possibly she had done her best, and possibly he had not done his best; justice forced that unspoken admission from him.

So a reconciliation which was in no true sense of the word a reconciliation was patched up, and weeks passed without any further collision between the ill-mated couple. If they were not altogether unhappy weeks for Marcia, it must be confessed that the reason why they were not so was that she

contrived to meet Archdale pretty frequently in the course of them. He wrote a very prettily worded and sympathetic reply to her note, in which he said that he would be guided entirely by her orders as to their future relations, at the same time hinting that if he was to be deprived of the solace of exchanging a few words with her every now and then, his life, already miserable enough, would hardly be worth having. He added that some researches which he was making into the method of the early Italian school would compel him to spend the whole of the following afternoon at the National Gallery.

Some months earlier Marcia might, perhaps, have thought the intimation a trifle impertinent; but now she knew the man, and his impertinences, if such they were, had become pleasant to her—as indeed they had to many another woman before. She went to the National Gallery, and they had a long talk together, in the course of which a good deal was said that would have been better left unsaid. She meant no harm; but she thought that she owed a fuller explanation to her friend than she could put upon paper, and naturally that explanation included some unflattering comments upon the conduct of her husband. As for Archdale, he was in the seventh heaven; because

this was exactly the sort of thing in which he delighted. He did not wish to get into trouble—his way of putting it would have been that he loved Marcia too truly to expose her to the risk of getting into trouble—but he did wish very much to make her understand that he adored her; and if any doubt as to that existed in her mind at the close of their interview, the fault was assuredly not his.

After this they met almost daily, sometimes at the National Gallery, sometimes in the Park, and occasionally at the house of one or other of their friends; and the surreptitious character of these encounters invested them, no doubt, with additional charm. Marcia had a certain exciting half-consciousness of danger, but it was not until within a few weeks of Christmas that she found out all of a sudden how real the danger was. She was walking down Curzon Street with Archdale, who had kindly offered to see her a part of the way home from the house where they had both been having tea, when he said casually, "I am rather thinking of spending the rest of the winter in Florence and Rome. How I wish you were going to be there too!"

The announcement took her breath away and made her heart stand still. In an instant she

realized what she had never realized before, how much she cared for this man, and what a terrible blank his absence would leave in her life. For a long time she had felt that he was her one friend, and that only to him could she speak candidly of the weariness and discouragement of her existence; but now she knew that he was a great deal more than a friend, and that his desertion of her would imply misery far worse than anything that she had hitherto imagined to be misery. It was not without shame and not without happiness that she recognized the truth. It is not permissible that a married woman should love any man except her husband; but then again it is not possible to help loving a person whom theoretically one has no right to love. More cannot be required of human beings—because it would be against nature to require it—than that they should conceal their feelings. Marcia thought that she was concealing hers when she remarked, with some slight tremulousness of intonation, "I am sorry you are going away; I shall miss you."

"If I could think that you would really miss me, Mrs. Brett," answered Archdale at once, "I wouldn't go. I am sure you know without my telling you that, so long as you are in London, I would much rather be where I am than in Italy;

but it isn't always wise to consult one's own inclinations."

"Oh, if it is a question of wisdom!"

"Well, perhaps it isn't. I have never pretended to be wise, and I am not convinced that I know what constitutes true wisdom. But I think I know what constitutes happiness, and one thing I know for certain, that if by remaining in England I could increase your happiness in ever so small a degree, I should increase my own enormously."

"That is absurd," answered Marcia, laughing. "Of course I shall miss you if you go, and I shall be glad if you stay; but I would not for the world think of interfering with your plans. Will you call a hansom for me, please?"

He did as he was requested, and although nothing more than has been set down above passed between them, Marcia knew very well, as she was being driven homewards, that Mr. Archdale would not go to Italy. "I suppose I ought to wish him to go," she thought to herself; "but I can't and I don't! After all, what sin can there be in seeing him and talking to him every now and then? And I ask for nothing more. I don't believe he cares for me a tenth part as much as I care for him; yet if he cares only a very little,

that is something. At any rate it is all that I have to live for."

It was all that she did live for just then; but Willie's return home for the Christmas holidays made a difference. For some days after his arrival his mother could only think of him, and although it distressed her a little to notice how rapidly he was developing both mentally and physically, and how independent he was becoming, maternal pride consoled her in some measure for the emancipation which she foresaw. There was no renewal of the rivalry which had subsisted between her and her husband during the summer. Mr. Brett, who was much occupied, and whose health was once more falling into an unsatisfactory condition, scarcely noticed the boy; so that Marcia was not only free to keep him with her all day, but could take him to the pantomimes in the evening. And she availed herself to the utmost of these privileges. It was too late now to say to her heart and her conscience that she loved Willie better than everybody else in the world put together; but she did feel that while Willie was with her she wanted nobody else. Perhaps also she was aware that his presence was a protection against dangers which she did not care to contemplate.

Certainly it was not with the expectation of meeting Archdale—because, for some reason or other, she shrank from the idea of bringing him and Willie together—that she took him to a concert at St. James's Hall; but, as it happened, there Archdale was among the audience, and at the first opportunity he left his seat to take one at her elbow.

"Where have you been hiding yourself?" he asked in a reproachful undertone. "I haven't seen you for the last hundred years."

"I haven't hidden myself at all," answered Marcia, laughing rather nervously; "but I have been in places which I suppose you don't frequent —circuses and pantomimes, and so on. We have been making the most of our Christmas holidays, Willie and I."

"Poor you!" exclaimed Archdale. "How glad you must be that Christmas only comes once a year!"

It was scarcely a kind speech to make, but Marcia did not resent it, because her own temperament enabled her to sympathize with the speaker and because the annoyance which she discerned in his face was not unflattering to her. Besides, he was justified in looking with jealous eyes upon the one and only formidable rival whom he had in the world. He retained the disengaged chair of which he had

taken possession until the end of the performance, and she talked to him over her shoulder, and he said a few patronizing words to the boy. Marcia was not sorry that an encounter which was probably inevitable had taken place, and it passed off, upon the whole, more smoothly than she had ventured to anticipate. However, as Willie walked away with his mother he said decisively—

"I don't like that fellow."

"Oh, but you must try to like him," Marcia answered anxiously, "because he is a great friend of mine, and he is really very nice. What is it that you dislike in him?"

"Isn't he rather a conceited sort of chap?" Willie inquired.

"Oh dear, no! he thinks nothing of himself, although in reality he is one of the most famous artists living. I know what you mean, but it's only his manner. It comes from being so run after and lionized. Anybody else would have been spoilt by all the adulation which has been showered upon him, but he isn't in the least. If you knew him better you would find that he hardly ever mentions his pictures, and when he does it is only to depreciate them."

"I expect he does that because he wants to be contradicted," observed Willie, with what seemed

to his mother to be abnormal precocity. She was not aware—and, for that matter, not many people are—that schoolboys can perceive the obvious quite as easily as full-grown men, and that the characters of men differ from those of boys only in a few comparatively unimportant particulars. As, however, she knew something of the peculiarities of the male sex as a whole, and as her researches had led her to the (possibly erroneous) conclusion that we are more prejudiced and more obstinate than women, she said nothing further on Archdale's behalf. In truth, she did not greatly care whether the two beings whom she loved best on earth liked one another or not. It seemed improbable that they would ever be brought into close contact, and, as has already been said, she was not anxious that they should be.

During the remainder of Willie's holidays she saw very little of Archdale. She did not seek occasions of meeting him, nor was she able to respond to certain imploring invitations from him which reached her through the post. Nevertheless she missed him; and it was with surprise and contrition that she found herself actually looking forward to the day when her boy should once more be taken away from her. This, more than anything else, brought home a sense of guilt and

shame to her. It is not difficult to believe what all women situated as she was wish to believe, that love, which is in itself so beautiful and innocent an emotion, cannot be wrong and cannot be quenched; but as soon as the consequences of a love which it is impossible to avow become apparent, self-deception becomes less easy. If Marcia was conscious of some relief when Willie departed for the station in his hansom, this was perhaps less by reason of a half-acknowledged longing for freedom than because she felt that, come what might, she could never bear to be despised by her son. And he was so clever and observant that possibly he would have found her out and despised her if he had stayed longer.

Her husband looked at her curiously after dinner that night and inquired whether she was feeling ill.

"No," answered Marcia, a sudden flush coming into her cheeks. "Why do you ask?"

"You have an appearance of feverishness and your appetite seems to have deserted you, that is all."

"Of course I am not in the best of spirits now that Willie has gone," answered Marcia irritably.

"Oh, is that it?" said Mr. Brett, in his customary cold tone; "I didn't know."

She suspected him of making an insinuation to which she could not reply, and she hated him for it. In assigning an ignoble part to her husband—which she was able to do without much insincerity—she found some justification for herself.

CHAPTER XVI.

MR. BRETT GIVES IN.

Marcia was quite mistaken in supposing that her husband suspected her of contriving clandestine meetings with Archdale. He suspected nothing, being resolved to suspect nothing, and, as far as was possible, he had dismissed the obnoxious artist from his thoughts. To dismiss all that she had said to him from his thoughts was not possible, and the recollection of it gave him many hours of pain; but just as nine-tenths of us contrive to close our eyes to the certainty of death or the probability that we have in us the germs of some mortal disease, so he refused to contemplate a contingency which he nevertheless secretly dreaded. She did not love him, and she might love somebody else. The thing was conceivable; but he had not—or so he assured himself—any fair grounds for believing it to be a fact. Therefore he went on in the monotonous routine of his daily life, asking no questions, and perhaps thanking Heaven that Caroline was not in

London to supply him with answers to the queries which he so carefully left unuttered.

But such a state of things never lasts, and never can last long. When Mr. Brett was plodding homewards one evening, feeling weary and out of spirits, as he generally did in those days, he overtook a sauntering couple whom he could not help recognizing. As he stepped off the pavement to pass them the light of a gas lamp fell full upon the features of Archdale; so that there was nothing for it but to stop and say, "How do you do?" Archdale seemed to be rather taken aback and confused. He explained, with somewhat unnecessary eagerness, that he had met Mrs. Brett in Oxford Street and had felt bound to insist upon seeing her home. Darkness came on so early now, and it was really not safe for a lady to be walking about alone in the less frequented parts of the town.

"We are very much indebted to you," Mr. Brett replied formally; "but we will not take you any farther out of your way now. I am glad I caught you up in time to spare you an excursion into the unfrequented district which we inhabit."

The remoteness of Cornwall Terrace, which was one of Marcia's constant subjects of complaints, was rather a sore point with him.

Archdale, who could scarcely do otherwise, accepted his dismissal, and after he had left them the husband and wife walked on, side by side, in silence. It was only when they reached their own door that Mr. Brett asked coldly, "Has this occurred before?"

"Has what occurred before? I don't know what you mean," returned Marcia.

"I merely wished to inquire whether you are in the habit of meeting, in the streets or elsewhere, a man whom I have been compelled to forbid your receiving."

"I have met him in the street, and I have met him at different people's houses, and I have no doubt that I shall meet him again," answered Marcia, in a tone of defiance. "When I asked you whether you wished me to cut him, I understood you to say that you did not. You have changed your mind perhaps?"

"Surely," said Mr. Brett, "it is possible to steer a middle course. Cutting an acquaintance is disagreeable; but I cannot think that it would be difficult to make him understand that his intimacy was not desired. That is, supposing him to possess in any degree the feelings of a gentleman."

"I presume that I do not possess in any degree the feelings of a lady," observed Marcia; "for I

certainly do not see my way to treating my friends as you order me to treat them. Why don't you lock me up in my bedroom? There would, at least, be some sense in that, since you don't seem to believe that I can conduct myself with ordinary decency when I am out of your sight; but there is no sense at all in allowing me a short tether and scolding me when I stretch it as far as it will go."

They had now entered Mr. Brett's study. He threw himself down in the chair which stood beside his writing-table and clasped his hands with a nervous gesture of despair. "Marcia!" he exclaimed, "this is becoming intolerable!"

"Yes," she returned; "it is intolerable. I told you so before, and I am glad that you acknowledge it. You are not quite in the wrong, nor am I; but we are neither of us quite in the right, and we never can be. It is a case of what people call 'faults on both sides,' I suppose, only there are some faults that can be forgiven and others that can't. You can't forgive mine and I can't forgive yours; so we had better part before we come to blows."

She ended with an unsteady sort of laugh which puzzled him. "I don't know how to answer you," he said, shaking his head. "I have tried to consider this question dispassionately; I am honestly

anxious that your life should be as happy as circumstances will permit——"

"My dear Eustace," interrupted Marcia, "you are honestly anxious to be rid of me, and I am honestly anxious to be rid of you. Why should we not speak the truth?"

"So far as I am concerned, that is not the truth," he answered—and his voice betrayed that her words had hurt him. "It is not true that I am anxious to be rid of you; only I so far agree with you that I think it would be better for us to live apart than to wrangle. Anything is better than wrangling."

"Yes; anything is better than that. I have been thinking it over too, and I see how impossible it is for us to continue living together. After all, it is not you who will suffer by the separation; in such cases the woman is always blamed."

"Exactly so; and that is just what makes me hesitate to comply with your request."

"You need not feel any scruples on my behalf. I know quite well that many people will decline to receive me when I have set up an establishment of my own—and I don't care. All I ask for is that Willie shall be allowed to spend half of his holidays with me; you won't have the heart to refuse me that, I suppose."

Mr. Brett made an undecided gesture. "As matters stand at present, that sounds a reasonable stipulation," said he. "Nevertheless, I am compelled to tell you that circumstances might arise which would render it inadmissible. While you remain with me I have some control over your actions; I can say to you—and, as you know, I have had to say—that this or that person must not enter my house; but if you had an establishment of your own, that power of mine would necessarily cease, and——"

He came to such a long pause that Marcia spoke again before he could finish his sentence. "Are you afraid that Willie will be contaminated by meeting Mr. Archdale?" she asked. "Well, I can assure you of this, Eustace—and perhaps, as I have never told you a lie, you will believe me—I would a thousand times rather be parted for ever from Mr. Archdale, much as I like him, than be parted from Willie. I would a thousand times rather stay where I am than be parted from Willie; and anything stronger than that I could not say!"

"Then why should we be separated, Marcia?"

"You yourself have answered that question. Because the life that we lead is more than flesh and blood can endure; because we haven't a

thought or a wish or a taste in common; because everything that I do exasperates you, and everything that you do exasperates me. I have tried to be forbearing, and I dare say you have tried too; but all these efforts have been in vain, and we should have acknowledged it long ago if we hadn't both of us been rather more afraid of Mrs. Grundy than we ought to have been. Now we have reached a point at which we can't help acknowledging it."

Mr. Brett sighed, changed his position and cleared his voice. ("Oh," thought Marcia, "if I gained nothing else by leaving him, what a blessing it would be to know that I should never hear him clear his voice at me again!") Presently he said: "You may be aware that neither you nor I could obtain a legal separation. By private arrangement we might agree to live apart, and, as your money is your own, it would be comparatively easy for us to do so; but there are obstacles in the way of our taking that step which, to say the least of them, require consideration. I should be obliged, for instance, to give some sort of explanation to my family."

"In other words, you would like to consult George and Caroline. By all means consult them, then. You can tell them that I alone am to

blame; but it will not be necessary for you to tell them that, because they will be quite convinced of it in advance. They will pretend to be shocked; but in reality they will be delighted to think that I have ruined myself socially, and that I shall be seen no more in the great houses to which they can't get invitations. You need not fear any serious opposition from them."

Mr. Brett winced. He could not deny that he was desirous of consulting his brother, nor could he help admitting that there was a certain degree of justification for Marcia's sarcasms. Finally he said: "We will speak of this again the day after to-morrow, if you please. I believe I understand what your wishes are, and if I find that I can conscientiously gratify them, I will do so."

That a man who was thoroughly straightforward and honest, should have appeared to her to be a canting hypocrite was not astonishing. Straightforward and honest men are not always happy in the phraseology which they see fit to adopt, and it is unlikely that Marcia's verdict upon her husband would have been modified if she could have overheard a conversation which took place in the City on the following day between him and Sir George Brett. The younger brother stated his case as impartially as it could be stated, and the elder

listened to him with a lenient, but slightly contemptuous smile.

"I don't want to be rude, Eustace," was Sir George's comment upon what had been related to him; "but the long and the short of all this is that you can't make your wife obey you. Now, I'm not going to give you a word of advice one way or the other. I don't choose to take a responsibility which doesn't properly belong to me; but if you ask me what I think, I don't mind telling you that in my opinion you have made an ass of yourself. It is very evident that your wife will get her own way—Caroline, I may tell you, foresaw long ago what the end of it would be—and I only hope that nothing more scandalous than an amicable separation will come of it. In the event of a separation being decided upon—which, mind you, I don't for one moment recommend—I should say that you had better allow the boy to see his mother from time to time. Still, if I were in your place, I should reserve to myself a contingent right of withdrawing him from her altogether."

"Contingent upon what?" inquired Eustace, who did not quite like his brother's tone, and had not expected to meet with such ready acquiescence in that quarter.

Sir George drew down the corners of his mouth,

raised his eyebrows, and jerked up his shoulders. "Upon her good behaviour, of course. Far be it from me to insinuate that there is a chance of her behaving badly, but in making arrangements of this kind it is always well to guard one's self against painful possibilities."

The younger brother went away sad and disheartened, nor were his spirits much raised by a very sympathetic letter from Caroline which reached him the next morning. Caroline took up something the same line as her husband had done. She could not advocate the severing of a tie so sacred as that of holy matrimony; yet she was bound to confess that if such a proceeding could be allowable in any case, it would be in this. For a long time she had seen with deep sorrow that Eustace's health was being undermined by the daily worries which he was called upon to endure, and that he should by some means or other be delivered from these was her earnest desire. She could only pray that he might be guided to do what was just and right, etc., etc.

"Evidently," thought Mr. Brett, "she thinks as George does, only she is too merciful to say so. A man who cannot make his wife obey him is like a man who cannot control his horse; the best thing he can do is to get out of his saddle."

The same afternoon he signified his renunciation to Marcia. "I may have failed in my duty to you," he said, "I can't feel certain about that; but what seems to me beyond question is that I have failed to make you happy and contented. There is no hope of my being more successful in the future than I have been in the past, so that, after full and careful consideration, I believe I shall be right in acceeding to your wish that we should part. Your wish remains unchanged, I presume?"

He had a faint hope that she might have thought better of it, but of this he was at once deprived. Marcia paid little attention to the matters of detail, pecuniary and other, which he submitted to her with punctilious exactitude; her only anxiety was with reference to Willie, and as soon as she heard that no objection would be raised to the boy's spending at least half of his spare time with her, she declared herself abundantly satisfied.

"It would be absurd to say that we shall part friends, Eustace," she remarked; "but at least we shall not be enemies now, and I should think that will be a relief to you as well as to me. You will be able to live your own life, and perhaps I shall be able, after a fashion, to live mine."

Mr. Brett made an inarticulate murmur which

might be taken to imply assent. Marcia, he was thinking, had some reasonable prospect of a life as happy as that of the majority of human beings; but, for his own part, he could look forward to nothing but work and solitude, and eventually death. And he could not help realizing how greatly matters would be simplified, and how resigned to the will of Heaven everybody would be, if he were to drop down dead there and then.

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